

# Stranded in Boğaz, Cyprus: The affair of the *Pan* Ships, January 1948\*

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## Abstract:

This article sheds some new light on the affair of the *Pan Crescent* and the *Pan York*, the largest ships to carry 'illegal' Jewish immigrants to Palestine from Bulgaria in 1947 / 1948. These ageing vessels were apprehended by the British authorities off the Dardanelles and escorted to an enforced detention near Famagusta, Cyprus. The ships remained anchored near Boğaz for five months while their human cargos were sent to camps just outside the walls of the historic city. As the clock counted down on the British Mandate in Palestine throughout early 1948, the fate of the vessels, and the thousands of immigrants who depended upon them, hung in the balance. Now, through a recently instigated cataloguing project for Cypriot newspapers instigated at the National Archive in Kyrenia, and the simultaneous uncovering of some relevant documents at the Public Records Office in London, a fuller understanding and appreciation of the events in this critical post war period can be attempted. This article is one of a series published in the *Journal of Cyprus Studies* that draws historical links between Cyprus and the Jewish people.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Cyprus, Famagusta, Jewish Immigration, Palestine, *Pan York*, *Pan Crescent*.

## Özet

Bu makale 1947-1948 yıllarında yasadışı Yahudi göçmenlerini Bulgaristan'dan yola çıkıp Kıbrıs üzerinde Filistine götüren *Pan Crescent* ve *Pan York* gemilerine ilişkin tarihteki karanlığa yeni bir ışık yaktaktadır. Bu yolculuğun başında bu tarihi gemiler İngiliz yetkililer tarafından Çanakkale

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boğazında yakalanmış ve Magosa'ya kadar nezaret edilerek insan olan yükleri tarihi şehrin duvarının hemen dışında karaya çıkarılarak burada göçmenler tutuklama kampında tutulmuşlardı. Bu gemiler daha sonra aynı yıl kış ve baharı geçirecekleri Boğaza demirlemişlerdi. 1948 yılının başlarına doğru Filistindeki İngiliz mandası gücünü yitirirken bu gemilerin ve binlerce göçmenlerin kaderi belirsiz kalmıştı. Şimdi Girne'deki Ulusal Arşivde bulunan Kıbrıs Türk Gazeteleri, Lefkoşedeki Yunan Kıbrıs dilindeki basın ve Danışma Ofisi kaynakları ile Londra'daki İngiliz Ulusal Arşivlerinde yeni bulunan resmi belgeler kullanılarak savaş sonrası söz konusu kaotik döneminin tüm yönleri ve değerleri anlaşılabilir. Bu makale, *Journal of Cyprus Studies* de basılan Yahudiler ile Kıbrıs adasındaki tarihsel bağlantıyı kuran makalelerden biridir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kıbrıs, Magosa, Yahudi Göçü, Filistin, *Pan York*, *Pan Crescent*

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## Introduction

The two large vessels that inched into Famagusta's port in the first week of January 1948 were crammed to the gunwales.<sup>2</sup> Thousands of weary passengers, all Jewish immigrants, began to disembark and immediately faced a mixed entourage of British officials, intelligence officers, Royal Navy personnel and government functionaries. From the decks of the two ships the Eretz-Israeli (Jews from Palestine) captains and crews along with crews of other nationalities watched the unfolding human drama with concern knowing that the fate of over 15,000 passengers was far from clear in Cyprus. Though it was not the first time Famagusta had witnessed such scenes, the 'Pans' were certainly the largest vessels yet utilized for intensive illegal Jewish immigration attempts to Palestine.<sup>3</sup> But this was an immigration into mandated territory that the British had to oppose, not least because the Arab population of Palestine was becoming increasingly apprehensive about the inevitability of an imminent Jewish majority. Despite the 'White Paper' of May 1939 entitled 'Palestine Statement of Policy', limiting Jewish immigration,<sup>4</sup> the flow continued unabated at the hands of the newly formed *Mossad Le-aliya Bet*. Two other main underground movements, Haganah and Etzel, also operated independently to achieve this aim. As the Jewish Resistance Movement<sup>5</sup> stepped up its violent activities against the British, so the British detained more and more immigrants in Cyprus, preventing them from reaching the final destination of Haifa.<sup>6</sup> An ex-MI6 officer wrote many years later, however, that by the end of 1947 there was a general realisation that 'hosting' the refugees in Cyprus was sure to "...develop

into a logistical nightmare [...]”.<sup>7</sup> Another report predicted that Mossad was actually exerting pressure on the British Government by intentionally flooding Cyprus with such refugees, and thus forcing the British to allow the ships to sail on to Palestine. The Pans were being used for precisely this purpose.

### **The Vessels and the Voyage**

Both the *Pan Crescent* and the *Pan York* were purchased by the *Mossad Le-aliya Bet*,<sup>8</sup> in the United States in mid-1947 from one Samuel Zamorai, the owner of a fruit-shipping company in New York. The vessels had similar specifications, both having been built in 1901 in Newport, Rhode Island, having a capacity 4570 tons, being steam-powered and having a top operational speed of 12 knots.<sup>9</sup> As a Liberty Ship the *Pan York* had been torpedoed in 1942 but survived, refitted and returned to active service.<sup>10</sup> When they were handed over to the *Palyam* organization,<sup>11</sup> the *Pan Crescent* was re-named, taking the Hebrew word for Independence *Atzma'ut*, while the *Pan York* took the Hebrew for Sovereignty, *Komemiyut*. Immediately preparations began for the real purpose of the purchase: the transport of Jewish refugees from post - war Europe to Palestine.<sup>12</sup> Later, two *Palyam* officers were commissioned as captains: Gad Hilb for the *Pan York* (commissioned in Marseilles) and Yitzhak Aharonovitz for the *Pan Crescent* (boarded in Borgas and commissioned in Famagusta) and two other *Palyam* operatives: Nissan Leviatan (*Pan York*) and Dov Bercik-Magen (*Pan Crescent*).



Image 1: Memorial for the Palyam in Caesarea, Israel. Photo by DG, March 2008.

Though old, their two captains were convinced that the vessels were indeed sturdy and could yet play a significant role both now and in the future. If anything, Aharonovitz feared that the Mossad headquarters in Palestine did

[...] not really appreciate the quality of these ships. These were the only ships thus far that could serve as a nucleus for the [future Israeli] fleet for the purpose of transport of immigrants, to be in operation immediately following the declaration of independence [of the State of Israel], whose date was already determined: 15.5.1948.<sup>13</sup>

After the purchase in the United States, and aware that they were probably being observed by British and American intelligence, the two vessels left New York in May 1947 simultaneously, then steered separate courses to throw British intelligence off their scent. The *Pan Crescent* headed directly for Venice while the *Pan York* made for Marseilles, via Casablanca, Brest, and Constantia, Romania. When she returned to Marseilles she docked more permanently to enable preparations to get underway to convert the ship to carry a very different cargo. The *Pan Crescent* was similarly laid up in Venice.



Image 2: *Pan York* Courtesy of Palyam on-line historical database.

Despite the covert operations and the efforts made to evade British intelligence, however, the *Pan Crescent* had already drawn the attention of MI6 through its substantial refitting process in Venice to accommodate an anticipated 7,500 passengers.



Image 3: *Pan Crescent* Courtesy of Palyam on-line historical database.

In fact, the British GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters) in cooperation with the American NSA (National Security Agency) had spotted the ships purchase transaction in the United States, and had been onto the operation since. To stop its voyage, and to thwart the overall mission, would now require decisive action. Harold Perkins, a senior MI6 officer, devised a radical plan to sabotage the ships, even if such actions carried with them the distinct “[...] possibility of death.” Clement Attlee must have approved the plan as shortly thereafter a special task force, the ‘Kent Corps Specials’, headed by Fredrick Vanden Heuval, made its move to destroy the *Pan Crescent* at its berth. Posing as cigarette smugglers, the team approached the vessel in a small boat, attached mines to the hull beneath the waterline, and rowed away in anticipation of the explosion which would send the vessel to the bottom. Though the detonation went perfectly the ship was saved from sinking through the quick action of those on board who immediately manned the pumps. In reality, the ship was probably saved due to the fact that the explosion occurred in the shallows of the port, not in the open sea where it would almost certainly have sunk. The first attempt had failed and would later

be described by a retired officer involved in the operation as “[...] a dark page in MI6 post-war history.”<sup>14</sup>

Immediately a Palyam delegation, Motti Hod and Haim Winkler, was sent to investigate the causes of the explosion and soon located a Palyam-employed Italian foreman who, it was felt, might have collaborated with British Intelligence. He confessed that there was an element of truth in this, but insisted too that he had actually saved the ship by shortening the detonator fuse, causing the charge to explode in the port, instead of in the open sea. His hasty explanation, the delegates later reported, had “[...] just won his life back.”<sup>15</sup> Next they communicated with Shaul Avigur, head of Mossad, from Switzerland, to decide what to do with the damaged hull. Avigur did not accept the suggestion that the vessel (and with it the mission) be scrapped and ordered the repair of the vessel. The explosion hole was temporarily blocked up and the ship was towed to a nearby yard where it was repaired professionally. Even there, Avigur recalled, another attempt to sabotage the ship was made when “[...] a mysterious fire caught on the motor room which was hardly extinguished...”<sup>16</sup>

With the refit complete the *Pan Crescent* now took on an Italian crew and the *Pan York*, Spanish sailors. Each ship was then appointed a Palyam captain who, though well versed in seamanship, would not interfere with the decisions of the vessels’ commercial captain, so long as the wider mission was being carried out and the refugees treated well.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, a Palyam radio man (or woman) operated from an alternative radio room on board and maintained continuous communications with the Mossad and Palyam headquarters in Palestine. Operationally functional now, the *Pan Crescent* sailed to the port of Burgas (having been denied access to Constantia, Rumania) on the Black Sea coast of Bulgaria, where she met up with the *Pan York*. Here the embarkation of the refugees began and here the journey to Palestine, under the command of Dov Magen (the Palyan commander of the *Pan Crescent*) started on 26.12.1947.<sup>18</sup> Conditions on board both vessels were grim. One memoir recalls “After four or five days, [a passenger] would wonder if the smells of the latrines, crushed crackers, sardines, exhausted air, used-up breath, and sweat had permeated one’s skin for all time, as it had permeated the wood and metal of the *Pan York*.”<sup>19</sup>

Immediately upon exiting the Dardanelles the two vessels were intercepted by four British destroyers and two cruisers with strict orders

to prevent them sailing all the way to Palestine.<sup>20</sup> The captains, representing the Jewish Agency,<sup>21</sup> and mediated by the US Department of State, negotiated with the British until, on the 31st of December, they reached an agreement. British personnel would board the ships unarmed on the understanding that passengers / crew would not resist.



Image 4: The Decks of the *Pan York*, Photo Frank Periman. Aliyah Bet & Machal Virtual Museum.

One negotiator recalled

[...] it was obvious, that should we resist, no one would board the ship. [Because everyone understood that] it was going to be a violent conflict, and a bitter one at that. The pressure on us was that we will not initiate violent resistance, and the truth is that we succumbed to that pressure [by the Agency], and so it was.<sup>22</sup>

Crewmember Sam Schulman remembered:

We decided not to put up resistance considering the number of refugees we had on board. So we followed the British ships to Cyprus where the refugees got off and were consequently interned. As a crew member, I, as well as several other Aliye Bet members, were allowed to stay aboard the ship, but under the watchful eye of the British garrison.<sup>23</sup>



Image 4: Refugees on board of the *Pan Crescent* Source: Haganah Archive, photograph no. 97129. The photograph illustrates the crowdedness on board, and the tension on the faces of the passengers.

On 1.1.1948 the Pans arrived at their new destination, the port of Famagusta where responsibility for the vessels was transferred from the Royal Navy to the Governor of Cyprus. The British authorities in



Famagusta, as well as the Mossad, demanded that the evacuation of the vessels take place under the direct supervision of the colonial power, though this was a condition that the Jewish captains could not accept. They knew that once the vessels were without their original crews, they would be confiscated as ‘abandoned ships’.

[...] [we will not evacuate] as in this case these ships have not violated any law [...] but sailed under consent and authority of the British, and under a Panamanian flag to a Cyprus port that does not forbid this; it seemed to us that the British would not be able to confiscate the ships, moreover, the date for partitioning Palestine<sup>24</sup> was already set, and it was sensible to see the ships as a legal property of the bodies that will be in charge of the Jewish part of [partitioned] Palestine.<sup>25</sup>

The disembarkation of 15,706 souls when it began was slow and took three consecutive 24-hours cycles, under the supervision of the Sixth Airborne Division of the paratroopers. Local newspapers noted that 7,000 of the ‘Pan Krisent’ [sic] passengers, including 1,700 children, went immediately to Karaoglu and Ksilotimbo [sic]. The newspaper also noted, with some relief, that 55 doctors were in their midst.<sup>26</sup>

Ashore, Gad Hilb, the captain of *Pan York*, met with the commander of the British fleet, Admiral Victor Symonds Taylor and recalled his embarrassment at coming face to face with the tall, fully decorated and immaculately uniformed admiral. After his voyage Hilb was far from his match being dressed in dirty mechanic’s cloths. Nevertheless, he demanded a written promise for the safety, security and freedom of the ships crews,<sup>27</sup> and asked for an “[...] immediate supply of fuel in order to ensure the continued operation of the essential ships’ systems.” Otherwise, Hilb warned the Admiral, the crews would abandon the ships and would not sustain essential services, leaving the responsibility for the safety and welfare of the refugees squarely in the hands of the British authorities.<sup>28</sup> The British commander obliged, and shortly thereafter a destroyer was tied to *Pan York* and a quantity of fuel transferred. Hilb then ordered his first mate, a Basque, to talk to the rest of the Spanish crew and tell them not to abandon the ship. They agreed and remained on board as did some of the Palyam personnel, including the radio man who continued with his secret transmissions. The following day (2.1.1948)

Goldman & Walsh

Hilb received two documents from the Governor of Cyprus: one guaranteeing that none of the ships' crew would be arrested, and another in the form of a warrant for the detention of the two ships in Cyprus. Everybody else was taken to the detention camp in Karaolos (today Karakol Mahallesi – Gülseren military compound), about 2 Km northwest of the old city of Famagusta.<sup>29</sup>

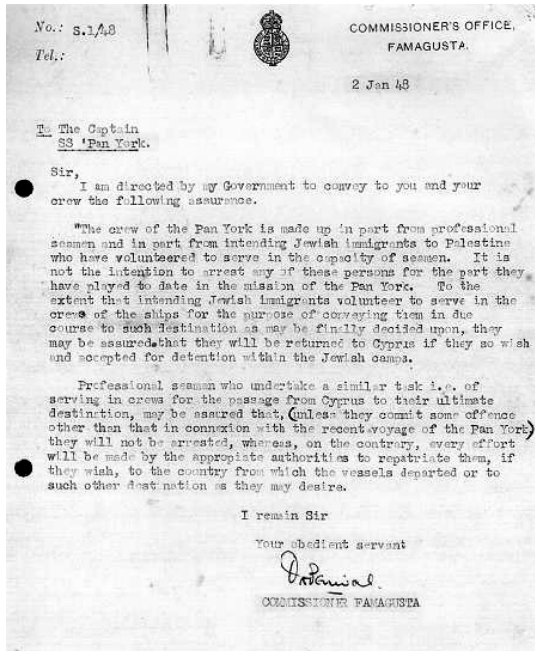


Image 5: Agreement between the Commissioner and the Captain of *Pan York*. Image courtesy of Gad Hilb, private collection. The agreement was issued by the Commissioner of Famagusta. It reads: “[...] it is not the intention to arrest any of these persons [...]” then goes on to say that the Jewish crews were guaranteed a return to Cyprus after the ship reached its final destination, and be detained in the Jewish camps. The foreign crews were guaranteed no arrest, and the promise that the British Government would repatriate them.

That said, local newspaper *Halkin Sesi* received a letter from a certain N. Josephides of the Intelligence Service, in which he quoted Foreign Secretary Bevin who had emphasized that there could be no permanent

home for the recently arrived immigrants on Cyprus. Quite the contrary! After the impending termination of the British Mandate in Palestine in May, it would in fact be illegal to detain them further against their will.<sup>30</sup> Sir Alexander Cadogan informed the Palestine Commission that after this date ‘My government will be willing to release from detention the ships *Pan York* and *Pan Crescent* for the purpose of their removal, concerning which the commission may wish to negotiate with the Jewish Agency.’<sup>31</sup>

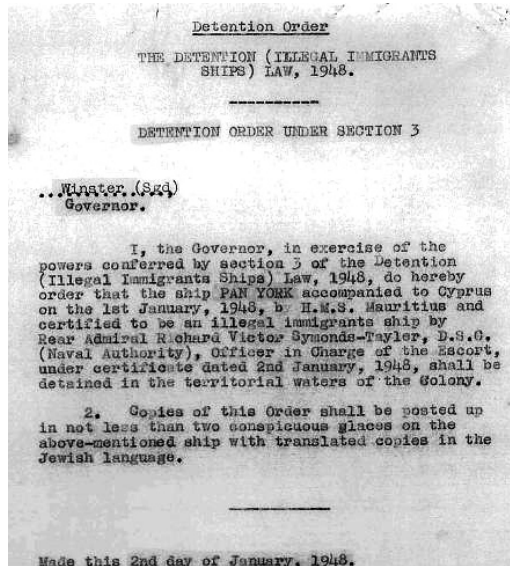


Image 6: Detention Order for the Two Ships. Image courtesy of Gad Hilb, private collection. The order was issued by the Governor of Cyprus, on 2.2.1948, and reads: “[...] I, the Governor, in exercise of the powers conferred by Section [...] Law, 1948, do hereby order the ship PAN YORK [...] shall be detained in the territorial waters of the colony.” A similar order was issued to the captain of *Pan Crescent*.

The disembarkation continued until January 4th, and a week later Hilb received a paper from the British ‘Controller of Customs and Excise’ ordering the two ships to be moved 25 kilometres further down the coast to Boğaz (Boghaz). Here they would remain, under his command, for the following five months.

From January to May relations with the British authorities remained peaceful, with military personnel coming on board from time to time from Royal Navy vessels anchored close by.<sup>32</sup> Of course there were suspicions based on intelligence reports concerning Palyam activities against the Royal Navy, but these amounted to nothing.<sup>33</sup>

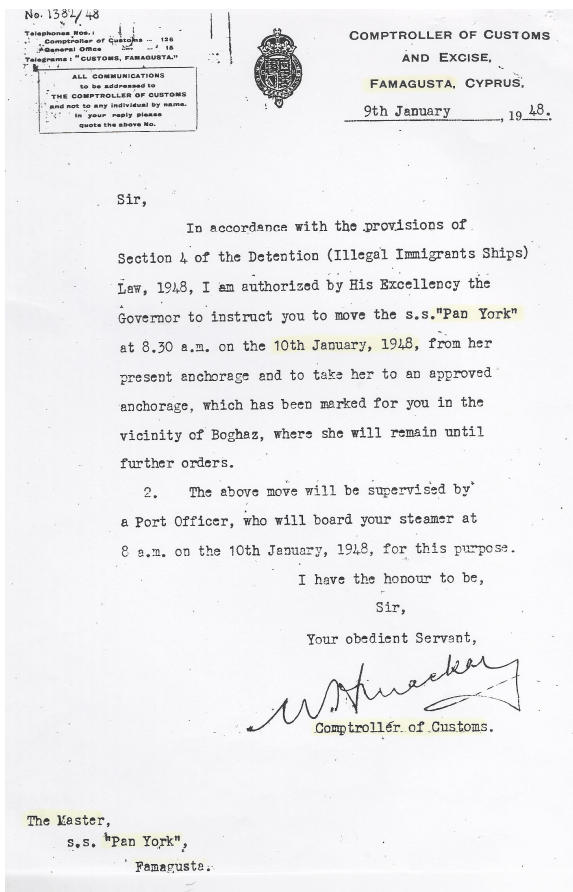


Image 7: Order to Move Out to Boğaz. Image courtesy of Gad Hilb, private collection. It reads "[...] I am authorized by His Excellency the Governor to instruct you to move the S.S. 'Pan York' [...] from her present anchorage, and to take her to an approved anchorage, which has been marked for you in the vicinity of Boghaz, where she will remain until further orders."

In the meantime the two ships were supplied by the British Navy with everything they needed to maintain systems during the stay. In reality, they asked for (and received) a lot more than they actually needed, and so hoarded the excess should they need to sail out at short notice. The British detected this over-consumption and demanded an explanation.

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| <b>OUT</b>   |  |                                    |  |                           |
| ABOVE THIS LINE FOR SIGNALS USE ONLY   |  |                                    |  |                           |
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| <b>INFO</b>  |  |                                    |  |                           |
| THIS LINE FOR SIGNALS USE ONLY   |  | Message Instructions               |  | Group Count               |
| Security Classification (see NOTE below)   |  | Originator's Number                |  |                           |
| <p>I DO NOT UNDERSTAND WHY YOUR FUEL REMAINING HAS DROPPED FROM 102 TONS ON 25<sup>th</sup> OF FEB TO 46 TONS ON 4<sup>th</sup> OF MARCH. THIS REPRESENTS DAILY CONSUMPTION OF 7 TONS WHEN IT SHOULD ONLY BE 5½ TONS. IN VIEW OF NECESSITY FOR STRICTEST ECONOMY IN THE USE OF FUEL, REQUEST EXPLANATION</p> |  |                                    |  |                           |
| Degree(s) of Priority and/or Originator's Instructions   |  | Originator's Signature (with rank) |  | Date-Time of Origin       |
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| <small>NOTE: This Message will not be accepted unless a Security Classification (or "Unclassified") has been inserted in the appropriate space.<br/>(0999) W: 14661-1130. GPO: 1944. 11/46. B. &amp; S. Ltd. 40-244.</small>   |  |                                    |  |                           |

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 פ"א י"ח א"ח מ"ח : 20042Z 04/03/48

Image 8: Message form from The Royal Navy to *Pan York*. Image courtesy of Gad Hilb, private collection. It reads “I do not understand why your fuel remaining has dropped from 102 tons from 25th of Feb. to 46 tons on 4th of March [...] request explanation.”

In the long term it was in everyone’s interest that the ships should remain sea-worthy in anticipation of the eventual transfer of over 50,000 detainees from the Cypriot camps to the new state when the British Mandate of Palestine ended, and to that end work on the vessels, funded by the British, was continuous.

[...] we wanted the affair to appear as a totally civil case, that the legal responsibility for the ships and the compensations that might be demanded for damages by the ships' owners will rest on the civil authorities of Cyprus [...] it was clear to us that the law the British issued [regarding the Pans] would not hold in any international court.<sup>34</sup>

A Greek Cypriot shipping agent, Prodromos Papavassiliou, who was a resident of Famagusta and a member of the city council was sympathetic to the 'illegals' cause. Hilb and Aharonovitz contacted him, asking for assistance and accordingly Papavassiliou cooperated, agreeing to take it upon himself to act as the ships' agent. As such he loaned them money for repairs, knowing that the money would be returned years later. His only security was "[...] my conviction that the Jewish cause will prevail, which is a good enough security for me." [Danny Goldman translation]<sup>35</sup> Years later the State of Israel rewarded Papavassiliou by giving him the lucrative franchise of the *Shoham* agency in Cyprus. 'Papa', as the Israelis called him, had to leave Famagusta during the civil war in Cyprus in the early 1970s, becoming a refugee himself, and re-establishing himself in Limassol where his shipping agency is still active at the time of writing.<sup>36</sup> He died in 2006.

### **The Refugees in Karaolos**

It is said that German prisoners of war were made to construct the 'summer camps' that the detainees were now domiciled within. All too familiar were the barbed wire fences and guard posts, though memoirs suggest that on the whole morale remained fairly high. That said, approximately 1,573 escaped from camps throughout Cyprus while a further 126 died of illness. *Hür Söz* newspaper on January 20<sup>th</sup> 1948 reported also that some detainees had been injured by gun fire during an attempted break out. Biba Naphkha, a young woman from Palestine who was smuggled into 'camp 62' as a radio operator to maintain communications with Haganah headquarters in Palestine, provided an exceptional testimony to life in the Famagusta camps. Having arrived on October 1947, she actually witnessed the arrival of the Pan ships, then became active within a group who infiltrated the camp through a tunnel, bringing with them light weapons and radio equipment. As the domestic situation in Palestine deteriorated throughout 1947 and 1948 the Haganah

was in need of young recruits to join the Jews in their struggle in Palestine. Naphka describes how the ‘illegals’ asked to join forces with them, and how her team did all it could to smuggle out as many detainees as possible, by whatever means. Naphka also documented the cordial relations with the local Cypriots who were “[...] willing to help, and envious how the British were pushed by us out of Palestine.”<sup>37</sup> On April 18, 1948 a person named Gabriel (probably from Mossad) met the captains of the *Pans*, in order to form an operation plan for the ships with the time and means available. He wrote a report to Mossad in which he detailed his conclusions and recommendations. The ships could possibly sail to Palestine under a Cyprus flag, though there was undoubtedly a shortage of such vessels. Due to overcrowding and the expense of detaining so many people on Cyprus the budget was being stretched to the limit. Even the vessels were costing over 1000 pounds a month and presented a tricky legal issue as they had sailed out of their port of departure legally and arrived in Cyprus against their will. In any case the next month, until the end of the Mandate, was going to be a period of tension and needed to be handled with care.<sup>38</sup> What would happen in the shifting political sands after the mandate was also unclear. On 12.4.1948 the Commissioner of Jewish Camps in Cyprus issued a top secret telegram to the High Commissioner of Palestine asking “[...] who will be competent to negotiate and enforce agreement if left till 15th May.”<sup>39</sup> The answer he received from General Sir A. Cunningham, last High Commissioner of Palestine, was a recommendation not to release the ships before 15.5.1948, and to stipulate that the release of them should coincide with their immediate re-employment emptying the camps.<sup>40</sup> The acting Governor of Cyprus, Reginald Thomas Herbert Fletcher, sent a further telegram to confirm this decision and to reiterate the legality of it.<sup>41</sup> Less than a month later, on 10.5.1948 the ships were officially confiscated (as opposed to detained) by the Governor of Cyprus, leading the Palestinian High Commissioner to ask for clarification from the Secretary of State:

[...] Your telegram [...] starts ‘the ships are expropriated by the Government according to section [...] of emergency defense regulations. We are told that since this government [Palestine] will cease to exist with the termination of the Mandate, it will not be possible to act on behalf of that Government for the purpose of

selling the ships. The ownership of the ships will therefore be transferred to the next government in charge [of Palestine] at the proper time.<sup>42</sup>

As the Mandate termination date neared, the Colonial Secretary's Office in Cyprus issued a letter to J. Shapiro, a lawyer operating on behalf of the Jewish Agency in Nicosia. In this the Cyprus Government, while recognizing Shapiro as the now legitimate representative of the owners of the *Pans*, reminded him of his responsibility to ensure that the vessels were used appropriately when the time came.

[...] Governor is prepared to release the two ships from detention [...] on condition that the ships will be used until the camps are empty for the purpose of transporting Jews from the Cyprus camps at the rate of not less than 12,000 per calendar month [...] Any rate of embarkation substantially less than 12,000 a month would require only one of the two ships to effect, and in the absence of an agreement [...] only one of the two ships would be released.<sup>43</sup>

Shapiro agreed and the ships were released to begin the transfer operation. On the day the British left Palestine, and the State of Israel declared independence (May 14th 1948), the ships were still docked at Boğaz. The following day, the Governor issued a paper to the ships' captains, revoking the detention order, thereby allowing them to sail to any destination. The document reads: "[...] I, the Governor, do hereby revoke the detention order dated the 2nd day of January [...]". A week later, however, Hilb received a written "naval message" from the concerned captain of *HMS Troubridge* who was keeping track of *Pan York's* fuel consumption, wondering why "[...] you are keeping steam in three boilers." They advised Hilb not to go anywhere, not least to Haifa, which was hiving with activity, as a centre for evacuation of remaining British forces in Palestine, and housing as it did the refineries supplying fuel to the Royal Navy. On 14.5.1948 the Israeli daily *Haboker*, printed a short news item entitled "The British Blockade on the Coastline Has Ended" in which it reported perhaps a little prematurely that the two *Pan* ships were en route to the Israeli coast.<sup>44</sup> Two days later the Israeli navy presented to IDF's general headquarters a classified document entitled "Proposal for a Plan for Transfer and Securing 24,000 immigrants from



Cyprus to Israel.” The document proposed that the ships leave on 14:00, without armed escort, going most of the way under the cover of darkness and reaching the Israeli coast by dawn. Here the Pans would rendezvous with an armed ship 30 miles offshore and this would escort them home.<sup>45</sup> But by May there was an increasing fear of air attack on these vessels and so the operation had to be interrupted and a new agreement negotiated with the British authorities to allow some refugees to stay a little longer than expected. There were also reports that while some camps were being emptied, others were still receiving and processing hundreds of refugees weekly.<sup>46</sup>

There was another grave concern emanating from the camps and that was the obvious priority given to evacuating men (and women) who were the age for active military service at their destination. Both the UK and USA had spotted this preferential treatment and so had taken back some control over who left and when. This led to a mass hunger strike by 24,000 detainees in the camps in protest.<sup>47</sup> The plot then thickened when both the *Pan Crescent* and *Pan York* turned up, unannounced in Haifa, officially empty and having sailed without first seeking permission.<sup>48</sup> By the first week of July a representative of the United Nations had arrived to oversee the embarkations, and so on July 6<sup>th</sup> it was reported that the *Pan York* had taken a further 2,100 women and children.<sup>49</sup> The next day the *Pan Crescent* took a further 4,300. In the absence of official documents of the individuals selection was made by sight and so, as classical music played through the public address system, those who could, and those who could not board, were decided.<sup>50</sup> On July 10<sup>th</sup> the *Pan York* set off with 2,000 more passengers this time without air support. Despite worries to the contrary the passage was a peaceful one. But still it seemed there were plenty of youthful detainees sneaking through and so the commissioner for Jewish Camps in Cyprus, Sir Godfrey Collins, sent an angry letter on July 22nd 1948 to the representative of the Agency in Cyprus. He ordered a shut-down of the evacuation operation at Karaolos, and warned the Agency:

[...] It is clear that no serious check was made and it is no longer possible to accept a position by which the military and civil authorities, [...] should have to assume that major part of the responsibility which should fall on the Jewish Agency. It appears further that, since 4785 male immigrants have already sailed [out]

[...] I must therefore require you in the future, so long as the ban on the immigration of males of military age [...] is imposed, to forward the sailing lists to me [...].<sup>51</sup>

The newspapers reported that of the 14,000 detainees left in Cyprus camps, 9,000 were of military age.<sup>52</sup> It was uncertain what to do when only military age detainees were left. In any case, by August the *Pan York* had been re-routed to Italy for essential maintenance work, while an announcement was made in New York saying that the weekly number leaving Famagusta was in the hundreds, not tens-of-thousands as it had been in May.<sup>53</sup>

The Director of Antiquities, Theophilus Mugabgab, standing at the port of Famagusta had watched the entire drama unfold and snapped these historic photographs of ‘illegal Jews’ embarking what is probably the *Pan York* and heading for a most uncertain future.



Images 9 & 10: Detainees Boarding *Pan York* in Famagusta to sail out to Haifa 8.7.1948. Image courtesy of Famagusta dept of Antiquities Archive, retrieved by Allan Langdale. The caption of the pictures in the album reads: “Jewish ship taking illegals to Palestine.”



The *Pan York* and *Pan Crescent* were sold for scrap in 1950 and 1952 respectively.<sup>54</sup> Famagusta briefly starred in a Hollywood role as the setting for the film *Exodus*, but then faced troubles of its own as civil war approached Cyprus. The peaceful bay of Boğaz now sees fishermen's boats and visitors to the fish restaurants. There is little left to suggest the human drama that was played on this stage other than a handful of black and white photographs and the memories of an ever-decreasing group of people in Cyprus, Britain and Israel.



Image 11: Bogaz, April 2008. Photo by D.G.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Goldman, D. 'Jewish Settlers in Cyprus During the British Rule 1880s – 1940s', *JCS (Journal of Cyprus Studies)* [31] vol 12 (May 2007), pp. 21-38; Goldman, D. 'Famagusta's Historic Detention and Refugee Camps', *JCS (Journal of Cyprus Studies)* [28/29] vol. 11, (2005), pp. 29-49.
- <sup>2</sup> Hür Söz, January 3<sup>rd</sup> had reported the vessels on their way. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 1948 their arrival at Famagusta was announced.
- <sup>3</sup> Hadari and Tsahor (1981), p. 223.
- <sup>4</sup> This was the third Statement of Policy issued by the British, published in May 17, 1939, authored by M. McDonald, then the British Minister for the Colonies. The main points of the document were: formulation of a bi-national state for the Arab and the Jewish residents; limiting the Jewish immigration into Palestine to 75,000 in the next five years; limiting land acquisitions by Jews. The 1939 white Paper was opposed and rejected both by the Jewish and the Arab communities of Palestine.
- <sup>5</sup> The Jewish Resistance Movement, founded 1945, and operated only one year, in an effort to fight the British presence in Palestine. The Movement was an umbrella group for the three undergrounds in the country: *Haganah*, *Etzel* and *Lechi*. This particular operation was carried out by Etzel.
- <sup>6</sup> Lussin 1982, pp. 444-445; Bogner 1991, pp. 29-39.
- <sup>7</sup> Dorril (2000), p. 544.
- <sup>8</sup> Hebrew name for 'Institute for clandestine Immigration', operating internationally to facilitate illegal Jewish immigration to Palestine, henceforth *Mossad*. A subsidiary of the *Haganah*, was formed in 1939 for that purpose. It was a small organization that numbered less than 100 persons. With the establishment of the State of Israel, the Mossad continued to operate as a secret service named *Nativ*, for the same purposes. The present-day Mossad (full name 'Institute for Intelligence and Special Tasks') was formed in 1951, one of its assigned purposes is clandestine immigration of Jews into Israel, as in the case of the Jews from Ethiopia in the 1970s.
- <sup>9</sup> Official site of the Palyam veterans,  
[http://www.palyam.org/Hahapala/MOTO/Atzmaut\\_MOTO](http://www.palyam.org/Hahapala/MOTO/Atzmaut_MOTO), accessed March 2008.

- <sup>10</sup> The attack happened on September 16 1942 on the Reykjavik – Sydney – Montreal run as part of convoy SQ-36. The attacking submarine was the U-165.
- <sup>11</sup> The naval arm of the *Palmach* (elite force of the Haganah) organization, established 1943, focusing on illegal immigration to Palestine and sabotaging the British ships that were involved in deportation of Jewish immigrants. Palyam operated in cooperation with the Mossad. There were between 50-70 Palyam activists.
- <sup>12</sup> There is an article about the *Pan Crescent* in earlier days by Joe Hafford called '*Pan Crescent: There's Always a First Time*' and this can be found at [www.liberty-ship.com](http://www.liberty-ship.com)
- <sup>13</sup> Aharonovitz (1964), p. 2.
- <sup>14</sup> Dorril (2000), pp. 547-549; similar account in Stewart (2002), p. 143.
- <sup>15</sup> Ashuakh, P., *The Refugees Ship Azmout (Pan Crescent)*, testimony in: Ashuakh, P., (2006), p. 28. This is in contrast to the testimony by Dorril (2000), where he claims a malfunction of the timer mechanism, causing the explosion in Venice port, or perhaps a cover story for the Italian foreman. It is also worth mentioning that Mossad was also busy with sabotaging British deportation ships, and even succeeded in sinking some of them as early as 1946, as described by Nachshon (2006), pp. 91-93.
- <sup>16</sup> Avigur (1967), p. 2.
- <sup>17</sup> Ben-Zur, interview, (2008).
- <sup>18</sup> Magen (no date) interview, p. 6.
- <sup>19</sup> R. Lowenstein, "Bring my sons from far," World 1966.
- <sup>20</sup> Magen (no date) interview, p. 7.
- <sup>21</sup> The Jewish Agency, founded 1929, the operative section of the Global Zionist Organization, during the British rule of Palestine was the *de-facto* government for the Jewish population in Palestine; transferred its authority to the acting Government once the State of Israel was formed on May 1948. The Agency is still active today with Jewish immigration to Israel, settlement issues and education in Jewish communities outside Israel.
- <sup>22</sup> Magen (no date) interview, p. 9. Magen described in detail in that interview his position at the time the negotiations took place, namely not to accept the British proposal of sailing to Famagusta. See also interview with Aharonovitz (1964) for similar description.

- <sup>23</sup> The personal recollections of a detainee at Famagusta can be found in: M. Schulman, 'Larchmont Ex-Prisoner returns to Famagusta' which can be found at [www.larchmontgazette.com](http://www.larchmontgazette.com)
- <sup>24</sup> The Partition Plan devised by the United Nations and accepted 29.11.1947; also known as 'Resolution 181 of the General Assembly', it specifies a partition of the area of Palestine once the British Mandate ends, between the Arab-Palestinian and the Jewish communities, creating an Arab-Palestinian State and a Jewish State. The plan did not materialize as a few months before the Mandate was over, hostilities between Jews and Arabs broke out in Palestine, expanding to a full scale war after the British left on 15.5.1948.
- <sup>25</sup> Aharonovitz (1964), p.2.
- <sup>26</sup> '15,300 Yahudi', *Halkin Sesi* (3 January, 1948), p.2.
- <sup>27</sup> Hilb (1965), p. 1.
- <sup>28</sup> Hilb, G., *The Story of Gad Hilb, Member of Palyam and Captain of Komemiyut*, Testimony in: Ashuakh, P., (2006), p. 65.
- <sup>29</sup> See Bogner (1991), and Goldman, D. 'Famagusta's Historic Detention and Refugee Camps', *JCS (Journal of Cyprus Studies)* [28/29] vol. 11, (2005) .pp. 29-49, for detailed description of the camps.
- <sup>30</sup> N. Josephides, 'Istihbarat Dairesinder bir mektup', *Halkin Sesi* (4 January 1948), p.2.
- <sup>31</sup> United Nations Palestine Commission – First Monthly Progress Report to the Security Council, United Nations General Assembly. A/AC.21/7 29 January 1948.
- <sup>32</sup> Hilb, *ibid*, p. 66.
- <sup>33</sup> Yatir, R., *Immigration Ship Knesset Israel*, testimony in: Ashuakh, P., (2006), p. 80.
- <sup>34</sup> Aharonovitz (1965), p.6.
- <sup>35</sup> Aharonovitz (1965), p. 7; Hilb (1965), p. 1.
- <sup>36</sup> Papavassiliou, personal communication, 2005.
- <sup>37</sup> Naphkha (no date), pp. 1-3.
- <sup>38</sup> Gabriel (1948), p.1.
- <sup>39</sup> Telegrams, Commissioner of Jewish Camps (Cyprus) to High Commissioner of Palestine, 12.4.1948, p.13.
- <sup>40</sup> Telegrams, High Commissioner to Commissioner of Jewish Camps in Cyprus, 17.4.1948, p. 11. (Admiralty document ADM 1/20793 17.4.1948 National Archives)

- <sup>41</sup> Telegrams, Acting Governor of Cyprus to High Commissioner of Palestine and others, 28.4.1948, p. 6.
- <sup>42</sup> Telegram, from Palestine High Commissioner to the British Secretary of State, 10.5.1948, Haganah Archive document, file 14/276, p.161.
- <sup>43</sup> Letter, Colonial Secretary's Office to Jacob S. Shapiro, 10.5.1948, Haganah Archive file 14/276, p. 93.
- <sup>44</sup> 'The British Blockade on the Coastline is Over', by United Press reporter in Haifa, *Haboker Daily*, 14.5.1948, p. 1, (Haganah Archive file 14/276, p.230.
- <sup>45</sup> Israel Navy Document, *A Proposal for a Plan for Transfer and Securing 24,000 Immigrants to Israel*, 16.5.1948, Haganah Archive file 14/276, p. 118.
- <sup>46</sup> *Hür Sözü*, May 26<sup>th</sup> 1948.
- <sup>47</sup> *Hür Sözü*, June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1948.
- <sup>48</sup> *Hür Sözü*, June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1948.
- <sup>49</sup> *Hür Sözü*, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1948.
- <sup>50</sup> *Hür Sözü*, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1948.
- <sup>51</sup> Letter, from The Commissioner for Jewish Camps, Cyprus, to Rabbi Szaibaum, 22.7. 1948, Haganah Archive document file 14/276, p. 8.
- <sup>52</sup> *Hür Sözü*, July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1948.
- <sup>53</sup> *Hür Sözü*, August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1948.
- <sup>54</sup> Yarkoni (2005), p.182; Yehuda Ben-Zur, personal communication April 2008.