

## Aliyah Bet

As Hitler came to power in 1933, six million Jews in Europe were facing destruction. Ze'ev Jabotinsky, in passionate pleas, begged European Jewry to get out before it was too late. "Liquidate the Galuth before the Galuth liquidates you" he said. His prophecy was largely ignored, but thousands heeded his warning. A wave of immigrants swept towards Palestine - only to find the gates of the promised land shut against them.

The British Government issued a White Paper, a new law announcement, decreeing that only a few thousand Jews a year would be permitted entry into the Holy Land. They issued certificates to the Jewish Agency to distribute among the few fortunate ones to escape from Europe. Betarim, however, received none of these certificates of entry since they were members of the New Zionist Organization and not members of the old Zionist Organization.

Then a new chapter started in our history, a glorious chapter of Ships in the Night. It started with a small group of thirty or forty strong. Shlomo Ben Yosef was among the first group of these so-called Illegal Immigrants. Soon the numbers increased - Austria became the main ship boarding country.

Rosh Betar then wrote a series of articles. In one of them, On Adventure, he strongly urged Jewish youth to make Illegal Immigration its "national sport". As for the laws designed against us, "whistle at them," he said. The youth needed no further instruction - the trickle of immigration became a flood.

As soon as the Nazis entered Austria, Jews could no longer leave freely. Betar started having to smuggle thousands of Jews out of the hell which had been let loose on them. Hundreds of these refugees were stranded at Balkan ports, waiting for boats without food or clothing. In desperation, they appealed to the Jewish Relief Fund to send them a mere 1,000 British pounds - less than 3 pounds per person. This appeal was refused and illegal immigration to save Jews from Nazi tyranny was condemned by Jews! Thereupon, the revisionists organized an emergency lightning campaign in the United States and South Africa. Within a few weeks they had transported all 381 refugees safely to Palestine.

Illegal immigration now became a major activity. Betar halls were used as sleeping quarters while the problem grew beyond the movement's meager financial resources. Passports had been "acquired," ships had been bought and crews had to be bribed. Groups of 500 to 1000 refugees were assembled in groups along the Danube and placed aboard small Greek and Turkish vessels for the 21 day voyage. These ghost, or coffin-ships, as they were called by the Jewish Agency, usually had accommodations for 150 passengers. On their first day out at sea, the passengers threw all their identification papers and visas overboard.

The Aliyah received a new name - Af Al Pi, despite all odds. With its own flag and badges, it had become the national sport Jabotinsky called for. Adherents of any political creed were accepted on the Betar transports without question or preference.

As soon as the ships neared the coast of Palestine, they established radio contact with their ground teams. These friends on shore would send a patrol to the seashore which waited for the vessel to come into sight. They then signalled it to anchor at a specific point outside territorial waters. From the shore, motor launches, sail, and row boats, manned by the patrol, went out to the ships to unload its passengers. These usually took place in the dark of night.

By morning, the refugees would all be safely ashore. From the shore, they were marched away to orange groves and forests to hide in case they were spotted by British forces. From there, they were dispersed to private homes, Betar facilities, and to resettlement.

In this manner, Aliyah Bet, the first free immigration of Jews to Eretz Israel in almost two thousand years was accomplished. Aliyah Bet evacuated thousands of Jews to Palestine every month with the ease and efficiency of a well organized travel agency. Up to the outbreak of war in 1939, Betar had brought between 30,000 and 40,000 so-called illegal immigrants to Eretz Israel.

The colonial office became increasingly alarmed by the number of immigrants it could not account for, it threatened to deduct the number of "Illegals" from the few thousand certificates they issued each year. The reply was the doubling of the tempo of Aliyah Bet.

Thus the glorious chapter of Aliyah Bet was given to the Jewish People by Betar. edited by Fred Taub, of Cleveland Betar