

EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY OF A PASSENGER ON THE SHIP *PATRIA*

Translated/transcribed in 2019 from the Hebrew, written in 1980

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“The Odyssey of My *Aliyah*”

by Rita Regina Oppenheimer Gelman

16 August, 1940

After an emotional separation from my parents in Berlin at the Anhalter Bahnhof (train station), we traveled to Vienna. We were a group of religious young people under the age of twenty. We had graduated from *Hachsharah*, which trained us for immigration to Eretz Yisrael, our destiny. The Germans let us get out of Germany and they also allowed us to stay in Vienna until March 9, 1940. In occupied Vienna, we enjoyed complete freedom for two weeks, and we lived in a luxurious hotel and we ate lunch in a Jewish cafeteria, Breakfast and dinner we arranged for ourselves in the Hotel Maltzgassenhof. In Vienna we managed to visit most of the famous sites. Before the continuation of our travels, they [the Germans]

concentrated us in a Jewish school. The day before, there we slept on the floor with our sleeping bags.

3 September, 1940

We continued to be on the move, and this time finally to the border of the Reich. Five hundred immigrants from all corners of Germany gathered near a special train under the watchful eye of the Gestapo. Crossing the border was an exciting experience. In Bratislava, the next station, the same night we went onto four cruise ships that waited for us on the Danube River. Three thousand five hundred *ma'apilim*/ emigrants from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, almost a thousand people for a boat built to carry only three hundred passengers! It was crowded and difficult. We were trying to find room between the suitcases. Sleeping on the ground with our sleeping bags in such a condition—there is nothing to say.

7 September, 1940

We cruised down the Danube. We passed Budapest, and on the other side of the Danube was Belgrade. We enjoyed the whole day of sightseeing, the beautiful landscapes, but we suffered badly at night from freezing cold and the lack of space to put down one's head. There were also fleas everywhere on the ship, which disturbed our sleep. In the afternoon while davening together on the

deck, we made contact with a group of Jews strolling on the shore that seemingly understood what was going on; an exciting experience that left a very deep impression on us.

September 11, 1940

We arrived in Tolcha, Romania, and here the Danube cruise ended. We were supposed to go onto other ships, three ships, *Pacific*, *Atlantic* and *Milos*, that would take us across the ocean to Eretz Yisrael.

14 September, 1940

[Today] Shabbat, we will be asked to show a lot of patience to wait, to wait, to wait, and then suddenly to be ready for a big change. Today (*dafka* on Shabbat) we had to move to another boat, the one that will cross the sea to our destination. The first impression was terrible: that the “new” ship, really old, is small and foul-smelling, not for people, but for cargo. In order to make space for a thousand people, wooden bunks were built in every available space, covered with coarse burlap sacks filled with straw. Each person had only forty centimeters for personal space. Now, maybe I have a place to lie down, but, no place to sit or to move! We, a group of observant *chalutzim*/pioneers from Germany, were put in the bowels of the ship—no windows, no air, no light, but at least among ourselves.

16 September, 1940

Still in the port of Tolcha. There is not enough food, not enough water, and for each cup of tea that we get three times a day, we have to fight lines with no end. The nights are very hot, and there is nothing to drink. The congestion and the dirt did not allow us to change clothes and only with difficulty we managed to bathe from pails of sea water that the young men brought with ropes from the ocean—three people to one pail.

24 September, 1940

We stand and wait and as usual there is no moving and no information when we will continue.

6 October 1940

Rosh Hashanah. Somehow we managed with prayers without obvious disturbances from the secular majority. We crossed the Delta and we entered the Black Sea.

9 October 1940

The ship is crawling slowly at a disturbingly slow pace. There are rumors that the navigation instrument is broken; it seems that in many instances they cheated us. There is no electricity on the boat because the generator is broken. There is not enough food and not enough drinking water, not enough heat because the ship is a steam ship, and there are not enough workers to fuel the furnaces. To our

complaint that there is not enough food they tried to force us to give up on kosher food, but we did not give in. The menu for a day: three hard-boiled eggs, and a small portion of sardines, hard biscuits made especially for ocean travel.

11 October 1940

We arrived in Varna, a beautiful place. Since morning, they were loading food, coal and water on the ships—*Pacific*, *Milos*, and *Atlantic*. Rumors that tomorrow we will sail forward; meantime we went down to swim in the blue sea. The full crew of the ship arrived; they looked very scary, like pirates, speaking Greek, Chinese and other languages that were not familiar to us.

13 October 1940

Yom Kippur. It was impossible to stand up straight at the time of davening, because the sea was very rough, and it was very hard to be fasting and praying properly.

16 October 1940

It's already the eve of the Sukkot holiday, and we're still in Varna. Again, another week without movement. We agreed to accept another twenty Bulgarian *chalutzim*/pioneers in exchange for things we paid for, but did not yet receive. When we came closer to the deck, in order to load, we discovered that the Bulgarian people had

gathered a much bigger group of Jewish refugees that they wanted to get rid of! We had no choice but to forcefully resist this attempt. With much regret, we could not put our already overloaded ship in jeopardy by accepting so many more. When we left the port in Varna, we entered straight into a horrible storm. Our ship jumped like a nutshell on the waves. Many people got seasick, but not me. Therefore, I had a lot of duties: to clean the latrines, two in the front and two in the back. It was very hard; people were vomiting and had diarrhea which they couldn't control. There were lines to use the latrines. The ship rolled from side to side, and the suitcases and the personal belongings fell from their storage places, and there was great chaos. The same night, a little baby girl, healthy, was born on the ship. The whole time of the voyage we enjoyed beautiful landscapes and beautiful shores. We crossed the Black Sea towards the Bosphorus and through it we passed through the Caspian Sea and the Dardanelles, (Gallipoli: *ha G'dud ha Ivri*/ the Hebrew battalion, on March 15, 1915, the important decisive battle between the English navy and the Germans in WWI)—into the Aegean Sea to the Mediterranean Sea to the island of Crete.

22 October 1940

We are already in Crete, which looks like a big rock in the middle of the sea. We drop anchor in St. Nicholas, the

small port city north of the island, a picturesque, lovely place. The weather was wonderful, and again we could go down and swim.

23 October 1940

The reception was very exciting here. The whole population was trying to get closer to us in boats. We managed to get in touch with the [Jewish] congregation in Athens; the head of the congregation flew to Crete especially to help to get supplies for the rest of the journey. In addition, he took our passports for safekeeping so they would not fall into the hands of the British.

26 October 1940

The Sukkot holiday was over, as was Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah. [We are] in an unusually exalted good mood, maybe because of the weather, that put us in high hopes that we are coming close to Israel.

28 October 1940

This morning they hoisted anchor and we left the island of Crete. The Greeks arranged an elaborate sendoff for us, with dozens of boats that accompanied us with Mr. Levy, the head of the Athens congregation.

29 October 1940

At the request of many, we wanted to recreate our own holiday party for us, the group of *chalutzim/pioneers*, about three hundred people. Unfortunately, the festive event that we planned almost turned into a big catastrophe. The noise and the preparation for the show attracted all the other travelers, and at the time for the party to begin, all the rest of the people on the ship started to stream into the location for the party (the front deck). More and more spectators crowded in, and it was impossible for the organizers of the event to stop them. The unexpected weight on the deck at such heights had a destructive effect on the balance of the ship, already unstable, and almost caused the ship to capsize. When everyone got up to sing *Hatikvah*, the ship started to sway from one side to the other, until her sides almost touched the water. One moment the water looked as if it was a wall next to us, and the next moment it was that view on the other side. The ship turned with very sharp movements for a few minutes. The big crowd that was about six or seven hundred people started to panic terribly. People started to scream and run back and forth aimlessly. We saw Death before our eyes! (Not me.) In that critical moment, members of the ship's crew began to take charge, conducted by our known pirate, the captain. Like a cat, he climbed up the mast on a narrow path, from his bridge to the front deck, defying all the laws of nature. With strong

hand motions—because we didn't understand his language—he signaled the whole crowd to sit quietly on the floor, perfectly still, and it worked. At that time, the crew quickly cut all the sail lines on the ship, and restored its balance. That's when they allowed people slowly by small groups of three or four to return to their places. We were happy that nothing terrible happened; we breathed a sigh of relief. We cannot begin to describe what could have happened, because we were far from any shore, without any hope of rescue.

31 October 1940

We still are suffering from a severe lack of food, drinking water, of course. Every day they cooked tomato soup with rice on deck with ocean water for everyone, but not for us, the kosher ones. Also, the coal was used up, and there was not enough to fire the steam engine or the water tank. We are not progressing; the ship stands still. Salvation came to us from the beds and the benches. We chopped them up, and every piece of wood became fuel for the fire. [note from Chana: Her mother told her that even the bathroom doors and the walls were used for firewood.] That way, we succeeded at last to renew the journey. We stood in groups, we sat in groups, and we took turns with everything, because there was not enough room for everyone on the deck. Some of them were standing, while

others were sitting, and when they got up, the others would sit, because it was so crowded.

1 November 1940

Again our boat cannot continue and we are standing still. Somebody yells, "Friends! We are standing in front of Haifa!" From far away we can see The Carmel. We see the little houses on The Carmel. We look all around us and we see the harbor of Akko. What a beautiful view! We stood there filled with emotion, everyone with tears in their eyes, wordlessly looking at The Promised Land. In the meantime, downstairs, they collected the wood that remained so we could get to the port. From far away, a boat was coming towards us. The British are coming! Without any ceremony and without hesitation they came onto the deck. The first thing they did was to take down our flag, the blue and white flag. They turned the ship closer to port by pulling a rope and putting a guard boat that surrounded us the whole time, non-stop.

4 November 1940

Day and night the guard boat surrounds us. We already knew that we are captives of the British. What are they contemplating—we don't know. There are rumors that they will quarantine us on a ship called *Patria* that was also anchored in port, a gigantic cruise ship, I think 18,000 ton. All the time we look outside, we can see Akko, and of

course, we can see the houses of Haifa and the Carmel and the whole bay, a magnificent view. Yesterday we already received the first supplies from our land. That, too, caused excitement. The main thing is that we got water, and also the gift of chocolate for everyone! Everyone was emotional when we received these first gifts from our land.

5 November 1940

They [the British] transfer us to the *Patria* by boat, first women and children. The reception there was Nazi-style; English soldiers with sticks hurry us along by hitting us. Very encouraging!

16 November 1940

Rumors circulate that they want to transport us from here to Australia. We demonstrated to protest against sending us to Australia. Two of us escaped (in spite of the guards) from the ship by swimming, and they were not caught. Two others were caught. The surveillance intensifies. On that ship [*Patria*] we had better beds and also sweet water in the faucets as well as for showers. We enjoyed that. When we came to the boat, they fumigated us and all our belongings.

24 November 1940

The British prepare the boat for departure. Provisions come, including large quantities of coal. Since morning,

smoke has been coming out of the ship's chimney—is it a sign of an impending departure? Rumors: they want to send us to Mauritius. One member of our group told us, “Tomorrow morning at 9 o'clock there will be a protest against sending us to Mauritius, and during the protest, some swimmers will jump into the water.” (The height from the deck to the water was extremely high, about twenty meters. You need a lot of courage to jump.) The order of the day: Everyone had to be on deck at 9 a.m. (with the exception of those who had chores). For me and some other girls, we had kitchen duties; we had to peel potatoes. [While we were working in the kitchen that morning] Suddenly we heard a distant explosion and felt the shock waves where we were, inside the bowels of the ship. Through the window of the kitchen, we saw that the water was closing in fast. We understood we should go upstairs. We rinsed and put away the knives in the closet, and together we wanted to get out. This was not simple. From where we were, down there, we saw the crew, Chinese, Japanese, wearing lifejackets, looking for an exit. Doors were closed and stairs were in the opposite direction. People were screaming and went down to rescue their luggage. I yelled at them, “Don't go down,” but it didn't help. With difficulty, we managed to go up (I don't know how), and up there was total chaos, [people] screaming to the heavens. Everyone understood the ship was sinking fast. I left my boots in a corner, and I slid

downhill [through the passage] on a very steep slant through the water-filled ship. There was a swarm of people that made it hard for me to find a path to swim. Through an open window, I managed to get at last to the open sea, and there some young man forced me to take him with me because he could not swim. I told him that I would take him on the condition that he would behave according to my instructions so as not to drown me. He behaved perfectly. I drew him with me to the fishermen's boats that were in the vicinity a little beyond the fast-sinking ship, at the exact moment when the ship's chimney's met the water. [Rita told her daughter Chana that this man later worked in the kitchen in Atlit, and would save some extra food for her when he could.] Everything was covered with black sooty smoke. The *Patria* sank within ten minutes. In hindsight, it was clear that the *Patria*, eaten with rust, broke completely apart from the bomb. When I arrived at the fishing boats with this young man, I helped him to climb aboard, and the Arab fishermen pulled him into the boat, and I turned around, because I thought that I could rescue more people. So I swam towards the *Patria*, but the fisherman caught me with a lasso and pulled me to their boat and also pulled me onto the boat. On the boat, there was a heater and the Arabs covered us with blankets and put us in front of the heater because we were shivering and could no longer stand on our feet. Later on, they brought us to the big warehouses of the port. In

Haifa, they collected clothes with trucks. They brought them to us, along with sandwiches and hot drinks. They took care of us very nicely. In the evening we found out who was missing. More than two hundred people had drowned. The same night they transferred us on buses to a transit camp in Atlit. There everyone had bunk beds with a mattress of straw to himself. We got oranges and chalah and white bread and sweet water from the faucets and we were very relieved. We were held in Atlit for eleven months, and that is a story in itself. I wrote a letter to Mr. Yehuda Kadmon:

“I am writing to you my own experiences. I didn't know many things then. We didn't know that they [the Haganah] were planning to bomb [the ship]. Now I know that the cooking stove in the kitchen of the *Patria* was not working properly. With the ship's crew, they sent on dynamite hidden in the tools of the workers, and more equipment that would be needed to build a bomb. The British inspected everything, so they had to be concealed very well; inside a cabbage (they took out the middle of the cabbage, where they hid metal parts) and also among vegetables and melons that were brought on board. From these smuggled components, Monia Meridor, a highly trained engineer from the Yishuv, was able to assemble the bomb, taking into consideration, that the hole should not be too big, allowing for the *Patria* to sink gradually. But

he didn't know that all the metal walls were eaten by rust, and therefore a very big hole was created, letting in tremendously big wave, which sank the ship in ten minutes. After that, Mr. Meridor wanted to commit suicide; he felt guilty, which he should not have, but he didn't do it. He was the director of Raphael, and may still be.

There is an international law that people whose ship has sunk cannot be denied permission to go ashore, and that's why the bomb was used. That night, in Atlit, we were locked in. Armed with weapons, the British had to forcibly pull the passengers from the *Atlantic* onto trucks to be transported to Mauritius. It was a horrible night, many shouts and cries, but we could not help." The people on the *Atlantic* who had come later and had not transferred to the *Patria* were sent to Mauritius.

We also know now that Eichmann gave permission to our transport to leave Germany.

Postscript: After eleven months in Atlit, Rita Regina Oppenheimer was released from the camp and was sent by *Histadrut* to *Bet Havra'ah*, a convalescent facility for three months to get her strength back because she had suffered from typhus, dysentery, and pleurisy. After three months, she was told to get to the main road of downtown Haifa, where she could get a bus to Kibbutz Tirat Tzvi. The driver of that bus, Yerachmiel Gelman, became her husband.

An account found in the personal effects of her daughter Leah Gelman Elia, alei ha shalom:

I was born in Berlin in a Jewish hospital on Excesir Strasse. I grew up in the home on Potsdam Street until the age of six. We moved to Tiele Wardenberg 25. There I went to public elementary school in Luchow Strasse for three years. We had a lovely teacher, Mrs. Brandt. I then went to *Lechleis Lyceum*, another school across the street. I studied there for only three years and then the Nazis threw me and all the Jews out of school. I was transferred to a Jewish school, "Adat Yisrael," in the street Sigmund Hof. We went to live there in Sigmund Hof 8. (I went to a school for cooking, cleaning, child care and nursing.) The school was supposed to be for home economics on August Street. Then I went to a trade school. I wanted to be a baby nurse, but my parents needed money, so they sent me to a school of trade so I could work and help them.

Father worked at a department store "Dipaka," as a department manager for Michael Company. Michael escaped from the Nazis to Holland, and the Nazis threw out all the Jews without compensation or salaries. Father sat at home. Mother was a housewife. We were three children. Father began to try to sell sewing machines, knitting machines and typewriters. In the trade school I studied bookkeeping, typing and shorthand. I was in the

course for one year, because I came from high school, I only needed the last half of the year. The Jewish school was in Yoachim Street, *Mittel Schule Teller*.

At the end of my studies, I went to work in the office of the Rosenblatt family. He had houses for rent in Berlin. I worked in the office with his daughter. I typed letters on the typewriter. I needed to do bookkeeping, and once a month I went to the houses to collect the rent. I gave my parents the money from my salary, and I got an allowance. (With it I bought marzipan.) We moved to live in Dirkinsen Strasse in town. I worked with them until they left Berlin.

Afterwards, my parents sent me to *Hachshara*, [preparatory agricultural training for life in Israel] so I could get out of Berlin. My parents also wanted to get out. My uncle sent for certificates for them, but instead of giving them to my parents, the authorities decided to give them to young people from the *Hachshara*. (In February 1942, on Shabbat, my parents were sent to Auschwitz.) After the *Hachshara*, I received approval to immigrate to Israel with a group. There was not yet room. Meantime I waited at home and worked at a Jewish hospital in the kitchen on diets and I learned dietetic cooking from Mrs. Nellhans. There was a girl, Helen, that worked there and we became friends.

On August 16, 1940 I was invited to travel to Vienna with the entire group. It was difficult to say goodbye to my parents. My brother Johnny had already gone to Sweden

because the Gestapo was looking for him. He had worked for non-Jews as a painter, and one of the non-Jewish workers reported him. He lives in Sweden until this day. [Rita's younger brother David came to Israel and went to Kfar HaRoeh and then to Mikveh Yisrael, an agricultural school. He later settled in Kfar Biyalik, a farm with livestock and feed. They remained close for the rest of their lives.]