

40 Years of Rescue

by Ruth Gruber

In the summer of 1947, an American riverboat renamed *Exodus 1947* limped into Haifa harbor. Forty-five hundred Jews who had survived the gas chambers were aboard, defying the British to enter Palestine.

I was in Jerusalem covering the meetings of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine. I rushed from the hearings and drove to Haifa. Five hundred British soldiers and police flanked the dock with more war gear than I had seen in Naples in the middle of World War II.

The *Exodus* was towed into the harbor, crushed like a matchbox. Slowly, the people came down the gangplank, men with the exhausted look of hunger, adolescent Polish girls, startlingly beautiful Hungarian women, frightened children weeping for the mothers who had been separated from them.

The British hurried them down from the *Exodus*, sprayed them with DDT and then loaded them aboard three "hospital" ships bound for Cyprus. I flew to Cyprus to wait for them. You had to smell Cyprus to believe it. There was no water and no privacy. Yet, in the first year, 500 babies had been born and 800 marriages had taken place.

After a few days, we learned that even Cyprus was too good for the Jews of the *Exodus*. Herded into the three "hospital" ships, they had been taken to Port de Bouc in southern France, the port from which they had sailed to Palestine. I flew to Marseilles and drove to Port de Bouc where I discovered the ugly truth — the "hospital" ships were prison ships.

Each evening the people of the *Exodus* made a circle in the crowded prison cages, a Parliament of Displaced Persons, where they told the children the meaning of the real *Exodus*. And



France 1947

each night they sang *Am Israel Chai* — The People of Israel Live.

After three sweltering weeks, unable to get the refugees to come off the ships, the British made an announcement. They were taking the ships to Germany. Germany! The deathland!

As soon as I boarded one of the ships, a handful of men on the deck raised a unique flag. They had painted the Nazi swastika on the Union Jack. My photo of the flag became *Life's* Picture of the Week.

A British soldier led me down a flight of slippery stairs into the prison cage, into which hundreds of half-naked men, women and children were wedged. It was a black and white drawing of the Inferno. Blindly, I shot photos of their agony. Back on the dock, a young Haganah woman standing next to me said, "Now you will see the birth of the Jewish State."

Following the War of Independence, Israel began the work of rescue in earnest. First came the Jews of Yemen.



Cyprus 1947

I flew down to Aden to cover "The Magic Carpet Operation." From there, I flew to Israel with 140 Yemenite Jews. Some of the women weighed only 70 pounds.

"Operation Babylon" followed in 1950. Again I covered the story of the incredible airlift of 120,000 Jews out of Arab Iraq. Then came several hundred thousand Jews from North Africa. I spent my honeymoon trekking through the Jewish villages and towns of Morocco, Algeria, Tunis and Libya. Libyan Arabs, suspicious of strangers, held my husband and me prisoners with guns at our backs until the French Legion rescued us.

The North Africans were followed by the Jews of Romania and Poland, and in the 1970's the Soviet Union abruptly opened its doors.

In December 1984 came "Operation Moses," the rescue of the Jews of Ethiopia. In 40 days and nights, Israel airlifted over 7,000 people into Israel. For the first time in history, white people were transporting black people out of Africa, not to be sold but to be saved.

Rescue is a metaphor for life-saving; in these 40 years of her existence, Israel has rescued over a million and a half fleeing Jews.

Ruth Gruber's latest book is Rescue: The Exodus of the Ethiopian Jews. She is the author of 13 books, including the bestseller, Raquela: A Woman of Israel.

Germany 1946



ISRAEL:
A
FEMINIST
FUTURE

Ruth Gruber