

Establishment and History of the Cyprus Detention Camps for Jewish Refugees (1946-1949)

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By

Yaacov Nir

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In memory of Prodromos and Lella C. Papavassiliou.



If one man can change the world, that can be said Prodromos Christou Papavassiliou, a Greek Cypriot (1919-2006).
—*The Jerusalem Post*, 1st of May 2018.

ΕΑΝ ΕΝΑΣ ΑΝΔΡΑΣ ΜΠΟΡΕΙ ΝΑ ΑΛΛΑΞΕΙ ΤΟΝ ΚΟΣΜΟ
ΑΥΤΟΣ ΘΑ ΜΠΟΡΟΥΣΕ ΝΑ ΕΙΠΩΘΕΙ ΟΤΙ ΕΙΝΑΙ Ο
ΕΛΛΗΝΟΚΥΠΡΙΟΣ ΠΡΟΔΡΟΜΟΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ
ΠΑΠΑΒΑΣΙΛΕΙΟΥ

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PREFACE

Tribute to be paid to the refugees themselves, those people, babies, youngsters, pregnant women, sick as well as old for their unimaginable stamina and courage, for having just one goal: to leave hostile Europe and go to Palestine! All are to be praised!

This book is dedicated to the memory of the Holocaust survivors who, with their zealous will, wished to leave smoky, unfriendly and sad Europe, crossed frontiers, suffered heavily during their multiple 'Via-Dolorosa' voyages towards the embarkation ports, and then perished just before they reached their Land of Dreams – not 'Promised' – Palestine.

To the Cypriot Prodromos Christou Papavassiliou – '*Papa*' – an honourable man and friend of the Jewish people and the State of Israel. He was a man who could not accept that Holocaust survivors were being held in imprisonment behind barbed wire and under searchlight at night for perhaps the second or third time in their lives, and he undertook very dangerous and courageous operations to help them in any way he could.

To the good-hearted Major Maitland, one of the British officers in the Cyprus camps who showed, through his elegant and clever behaviour with the detainees, the positive and human side representative of so many of the honest British soldiers who were practically forced to capture and detain in terrible circumstances weary Holocaust survivors striving to reach Palestine.

To the activists Charles Passman, Maurice Laub, Hanoch Hillman, Yehuda Bragintsky, Lova Eliav, Prof. Shiba, Dr. Falk, Dr. Moshe Sneh, Levy Shwartz (Shevat). Reuven Zaslani-Shiloah, Yehuda Arazi, Head of the Italian branch of *Aliya Bet*, Italian born 'Ada Sereni, Head of the Milano branch, with her impressive character achieved the cooperation and help of the Italian government, navy, and maritime ports' managers, the result of which has been the extremely large numbers of vessels that embarked the refugees practically without any official barrier. Nahum Shedmi, Head of the *Haganah* delegation to Europe, Ze'ev Herring, Shaul Avigur, Meir Sappir, Ephrayim Dekel, Elkana Gafni, Mordechai Surkis, Yechiel

Duvdevani, Yitshak Ayalon, Jonah Rosen, Shulamit Arlosoroff¹ of the Paris branch, Shemarya Zameret, Teddy Kollek, Zvi Yehieli, Yehuda Ragin, Bar Gilead, Zvi Netzer, Ze'ev Schiend, Ruth Klüger, David Nameri, Israel Liwertovsky, Shalhevet Freier, Eliezer Bigger, Yaakov Wilenski, Shlomo Laks, and many others.

The author of this book was partially exposed to many of the historical events described herein. It is a most heroic but overwhelmingly sad story. Thousands of the crucial British documents upon which this book is based were gathered as a consequence of Nir's research into The Jewish Agricultural Settlements in Cyprus, from 1883-1923. While researching the subject at the British National Archives at Kew, he was asked by Prodromos Christou Papavassiliou to gather data concerning both the 'Illegal Immigration' and the Cypriot detention camps. Prodromos initially intended to write his own biography with this chapter one of the undoubted highlights of a most interesting and active life. Unable, alas, to complete that undertaking, the extremely challenging task has fallen upon the shoulders of this author, to illustrate and articulate a terrible period in Jewish history and to highlight the enormous courage shown by such dedicated and remarkable people, of whom Prodromos was perhaps the most prominent. Just recently a small paper was published concerning the famous book 'Exodus' by Leon Uris describing his part in this historic event of Cyprus (Mavrogordatos, 2015).

The advantage of this book, in comparison to earlier books on the subject, is the inclusion of material that had been classified up until the late 1990s. Once declassified (some documents had a 2022 'opening target' but were opened much earlier) this material was made freely available at the British National Archives at Kew, in London. Therefore, a great portion of the material included in this book has been brought to light for the first time.

The author² has thoroughly studied more than 230 files (besides many more documents found in books, professional journals and so forth) found at the British and the Cyprus National Archives containing information on legal and illegal immigration to Palestine over the 30 years of British rule. Some only contained a few pages, while others a few hundred. Some contained simple documents while most were unique. An analysis of the entire

¹ Daughter of Chaim Arlosoroff. During the first months of the war, she acted at the Jewish Agency underground Transmission station in London.

² Being Palestinian born, the author still remembers that most tragic chapter of Jewish revival history in Palestine and its woeful link to Cyprus.

treasure trove at the British National Archives of approximately 640 files dealing with illegal immigration to Palestine would have taken decades, and so the author subsequently decided to concentrate on smaller waters rather than drown in the ocean. *Haganah* Archives, CID files, #12 provided an excellent view of the security section of the Jerusalem Government.

Important Remarks

1. Since the book quotes thousands of documents, books and articles, some mistakes are unavoidable (e.g., unclear or false explanations in certain letters). The author therefore takes full responsibility for any mistakes or discrepancies herein. The citations quoted are as written in the original document.
2. The term *Mossad* in this book refers to the '*Mossad le'Aliya Bet*' – 'The Organisation for Immigration B' – and not to be confused with the modern intelligence agency. 'Aliya' means immigration, and 'Bet' stands for 'second' to be diverted from the formal, legally approved immigration.
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4. No part of this book may be used in any manner without written permission from the author except in the case of brief quotations in critical articles or reviews.
5. All bolded letters or sentences do not appear in the original text and were marked by the author.
6. Modern times Jewish settlements in Palestine that commenced in 1878 were defined as 'colonies' *Moshavot* in Hebrew (this term has nothing to do with colonialism).

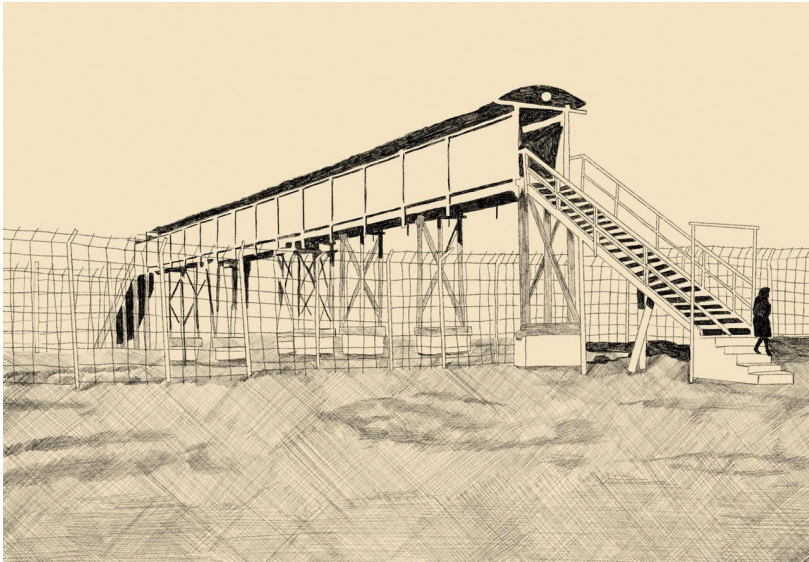
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³ *Palmach* – The Shock Troops, established in 1941.

⁴ *Palyam*: an acronym for *Plugot HaYam* - 'Sea Company', or the naval arm of the *Palmach* established in 1943.

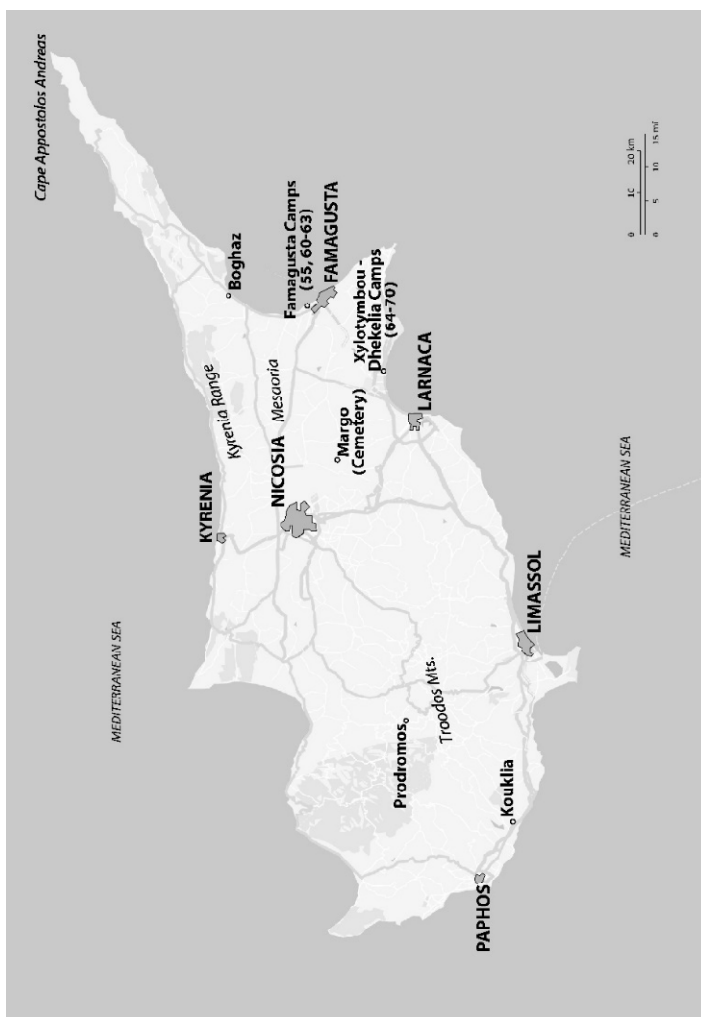


Pressure from the refugees forced the authorities to open a bridge above the road connecting the two bundles of camps of Dhekelia as late as the 12th of March 1947 (Prepared by Naomi Nir, after photos of Yad Vashem and Jewish National Fund).

For thou shalt see the land afar off; but thou shalt not go thither into the land which I give the children of Israel (Deuteronomy 32; 52).

“From all parts of Europe, from the concentration camps, the prisons, the refugees, from their homes, where despair reigns and over which hangs the idea of suicide, these innocent persecuted ones stretch out their hands to you in a last effort, and you will not deceive them.”

(A letter from the Union for Protection of the Human Person by International Social and Economic Co-operation; Paris, 24th January, 1939 to the Ecumenical Council of Christian Churches.)



Map of Cyprus showing the various locations mentioned. (Prepared by Naomi Nir).

INTRODUCTION

They were forced to migrate from countries in which they were subjected to strong political or economic pressure into countries where pressure was less. From that time the migrations of the Jews have become a permanent element of their history (Arthur Rupin, 1940).

The ‘illegal’ Jewish immigration into Palestine is one of the most heroic chapters of pre-State of Israel. From the First World War and the conquest of Palestine by the British (1917-1918) up until the end of the Mandate in 1948 (resulting from the UN resolution 181(II) on the partition of Palestine), there had been consistent ‘seasonal’ conflicts between the Palestinian Jewish community (‘*Yishuv*’⁵) and British authorities regarding immigration. Changes had been made to the quota of ‘issued’ immigration certificates by the authorities, with the amount depending mainly on the British High Commissioner for Palestine and his advisers – although the British Government almost always had the last say. There is no doubt that London was involved in the policy-making. The fluctuating strength of Arab pressure on the British Government resulted in the final number of immigration certificates issued being low, compared to the demand for them, in most cases.

Escape depended on two main criteria: firstly, the economic ability of the candidate for immigration and if it matched what was needed in the destination country, and secondly, and much more crucially, the goodwill of the global community to accept Jews and their integration. With few exceptions, most countries almost totally refused Jews entry into their territories, including British-controlled Palestine.

This most difficult political, economic, and emotional situation forced the leaders of both the Palestinian and diaspora Jewish communities to bring as many people as possible into Palestine by every means, whether legally or illegally. This is key to understanding the waves of illegal immigration in the pre-war and war-time eras, as well as the efforts of Holocaust and war survivors during the post-war era.

⁵ A well-known term then that was also used by the British authorities for the Palestinian Jewish community.

Due to the effective vigilance of British authorities back in 1935, it was estimated that ‘very few, if any, attempts are made to land illegals direct on the shores of Palestine from specially chartered boats, the risk being great’. The authorities could not have imagined in those early days how mistaken they were (CO 733/276/6).

During the Second World War those seeking refuge numbered more than ten times as many as the outlined monthly limit. Although the Allied countries were engaged in war with Nazi-German and Italian forces around the world, Jews were being murdered, slaughtered, burnt, and gassed, and next to nothing was being done to save them. Badder (1967) describes the sad situation as follows:

‘Besides a huge and successful rescue when the German-Russian war started [22nd June 1941], and while hundreds of thousands of Jews were evacuated from Poland to Russia, the world was divided into two: the first that annihilated us, and the second that was watching how we were destroyed.’

Eli Wiesel described it more simply: ***“Not all victims were Jewish, but all Jews were victims.”***

Even though this book does not intend to, and of course cannot, be considered as an official British Government document, it does try to represent the general mood and policies of the British and Palestinian authorities, mostly from political and economic points of view. Although Britain had saved tens of thousands of European Jews both before and during the war, its policy towards immigration into Palestine was of the opposite sentiment; no entrance to Palestine (besides the official poor quota of 1,500/month) was granted to these poor refugees, either before, during or after the Second World War. Readers not familiar with the details of that sad chapter of British-Jewish relations in the mid-20th century might conclude that there was no cooperation from the Jewish side, and believe that the Jews were ‘selfish to’ fight during the war over MacDonald’s 1939 White Paper (which limited the immigration to Palestine to a minimum, while thousands of Jews were slaughtered and gassed).

Although illegal immigration on the seas did not seriously begin until 1934, the main wave of immigration – started three months after the Second World War with the large-capacity *Aliya Bet* ships. The first vessel was the ‘*Sirius*’

(*Dallin*⁶) a small boat which sailed from Monopoly in Italy on the 21st of August 1945 and disembarked 35 passengers one week later at Caesarea beach.

Once the war ended and the Labour Party came to power in Britain, the *Yishuv* had high expectations, based upon Labour's earlier promises regarding immigration. Former policy did not change, however; if possible, it became worse. Prime Minister Clement Attlee and the 'professional' stubborn Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin showed little empathy, if any, and executed a hard to explain policy towards Holocaust survivors who wished to emigrate to Palestine.

Winston Churchill, although not officially in government at this point, wrote an interesting letter to Prime Minister Attlee in July of 1946, just as deportation plans were being drawn up and the prospect of immigration capacity for Palestine was being considered.

"I should however make my position known to you. Terrorism is no solution for the Palestine problem. Yielding to terrorism would be a disaster. At the same time I hold myself bound by our national pledges, into which I personally and you also and your party have entered, namely the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine, with immigration up to the limit of 'absorptive capacity', of which the Mandatory power is the judge. I might hope we should agree upon this. Several of my friends are far from abandoning Partition, and I am very much inclined to think this may be the sole solution."

Attlee's reply to Churchill's letter was quite laconic:

"We shall not accept any solution which represents abandonment of our pledges to the Jews or our obligations to the Arabs or which jeopardises our great strategic interests in the Middle East" (CO 537/1714).

After the outbreak of the war the British evaluation of the loyalties of the Jewish and Arab communities was made clear:

"The Jewish Community's attitude was, of course, inevitable and unanimous. Herr Hitler⁷ was on one side of the dispute; therefore, they were on the other."

⁶ The underground name for Eliyahou Golomb the *Haganah* Chief of Staff (b. 1893 – d. 1945).

⁷ Head of the *Jewish Agency* David Ben Gurion declared at the outbreak of the Second World War: *"We will fight the White Paper as if there isn't war against Hitler, and fight Hitler as if there isn't the White Paper."*

But the Arab community was divided" (CO 733/372/18; 10th October 1939).

*"If we are ever to have an understanding of this problem, if we are ever to play our part in finding a happy solution for it, we must be able to put ourselves in the shoes not only of the Jews but of the Arabs [...] the whole world knows that the re-occupation of the Old-City of Jerusalem a few weeks ago was an example of the way in which British Troops can with perfect humanity as well as perfect success conduct **a delicate military operation** in the midst of a civilian population"* (FO 684/11; Foreign Minister Edward Frederick Lindley Wood in an address to the House of Commons on the 26th of November 1938).

This was the difference between treatment of terrorists (the Arab gangs), and the conduct towards the Jewish 'illegal' immigrants. The first were treated 'with perfect humanity' while the others were, after the war, killed or wounded by British fire.

From mid-1945 various-sized vessels began illegally disembarking Holocaust survivors along the Palestinian coast. Many were caught by the British police, navy and army and placed in the Palestinian detention camps of 'Athlit, Sarafend (near Rishon le Zion – present day Tzrifin – approx. 20 km ESE of Tel Aviv) and 'Akko (Acre). The number of illegal immigrants (*ma'apilim* in Hebrew) in overcrowded prison camps in Palestine grew and reached a few thousand. As a result, the British authorities decided on the implementation of an 'old-but-new' policy, that of deporting all captured immigrants to detention camps around the British colonies, and in particular to Cyprus. This idea of detention outside Palestine had been debated already in the summer of 1939. Although not officially declared, the intention was probably to cause as much damage as possible to the Jewish 'Yishuv' in Palestine and make life for refugees there as difficult and hellish as possible⁸, in order to dissuade further immigrants from setting sail for Palestine. The British authorities however had not taken into consideration the sad fact that these refugees had already been through a terrible experience and that a hard life was not a strong disincentive.

Most books that deal with this subject are in the Hebrew language and are based upon documents, witnesses, memoirs, and diary accounts. This particular publication has the advantage of including new information found in declassified files from the British National Archives in London and the Cyprus State Archives in Nicosia, mostly data that was not dealt with before (most were released to the public from the mid-nineties and on), as well as

⁸ See also Appendix D1.

from the Cypriot British language newspaper the *Cyprus Mail* and some other sources.

Some relevant information is found in Avidov's '*Obscured Routes*' (1955), which outlines the entire history of un-official Jewish immigration from Asia, Europe and Africa. A few interviews with people who worked at the camps, and many memoirs from the *Palyam* people collected at *Bet-HaPalmach* in Tel Aviv were added to this intricate material and published in 2001 (*Palyam*: an acronym for *Plugot HaYam* - 'Sea Company', or the naval arm of the *Palmach* established in 1943). A most comprehensive book by Yehuda Braginsky (1965) covers the entire time span of 1934 to 1948, with its various complications, history, internal Jewish political conflicts, and immigration. '*The Book of the Immigrants – 1934-1946*' was edited by Basok (1947) who gathered documents mainly from newspapers and other sources. It is a book that covers and represents the spirit and feeling of the Jewish community of Palestine of the time. Another important book was published in 1973 by Itshak Ben Yosef, '*Letters from Cyprus*'. These original letters are much more valued than many of the other books that presented personal memoirs that were recollected tens of years later. Ben Yosef bravely exposed many dark points of the general behaviour of the refugees, as well as that of the British authorities!

I should mention Nahum Bogner's excellent work in Hebrew, '*The Deportation Island*', which covers events of the two and a half years in the Cypriot camps from August 1946 to February 1949. A most comprehensive and detailed book by Dalia Offer, '*Illegal Immigration during the Holocaust*' (1988), covers the Second World War '*Aliya Bet*' operations. Another wide-ranging book is by Sha'ari (1981) - '*The Cyprus Deportation: 1946-1949*' (1981). *Britain's Naval and Political Reaction to the Illegal Immigration of Jews to Palestine, 1945-1948*, by Freddy Liebreich, himself an illegal immigrant to Palestine in 1939, is another vital title. Ninian Stewart concentrated his study on *The Royal Navy and the Palestine Patrol* (2002), giving a most detailed account of the Royal Navy, its ships and commanders. Swarc's PhD dissertation of 2006 '*Illegal Immigration to Palestine 1945-1948: The French Connection*' adds important information regarding the pro-Jewish part taken by the French Government. Major General Dare Wilson enriched the basic information in regard to the part taken by the 6th Airborne Division during the last three years of the Mandate. Teutsch (2019) in his most comprehensive book *The Cyprus Detention Camps, The Essential Research Guide* undoubtedly will soon become the 'Cypruspedia' for all future researchers on the Cyprus detention camps. Daphnah Sharfman's 2020 book

looks at the part taken by Italy from 1945 to 1948 regarding the unofficial help to Jewish immigration.

The author decided to concentrate on mainly British and foreign resources for this study, rather than local Hebrew books and newspapers. These resources expose (and in many cases for the first time) much data and provide many solutions for plenty of ‘unsolved historical questions’, although many will, undoubtedly, remain unsolved forever!

This work represents and is based upon thousands of documents originating from 146 files from the British National Archives at Kew, London. It also draws on previous books, newspapers, publications, and contemporaneous articles. The sources of information that are the base of this work are so varied and crucial for further studies also. Therefore, I decided to uncover and publish them, as I could not afford to neglect such multiple sources of basic, and to some extent, what until recently was obscured material (see Appendix K).

As mentioned above, the author began this research as just a ‘representative’ of Prodromos C. Papavassiliou, but as time went on and the research progressed the author decided to extract as much as possible out of the opportunity.

It is worth quoting Jules Crevaux, the 19th century French naval surgeon, as he explored the Amazon River:

“A rushed journey is a waste of time; you can see nothing... I must take advantage of it, for I shall never return to these waters again. Instinct tells me to let myself drift with the swift current. Reason stops me; for an explorer, hurrying through an unknown land is like running away from the enemy.”

This has been the author’s philosophy whilst undertaking this research and writing.

Important Remarks

1. The subject of illegal immigration into Palestine and the Cyprus detention camps has been dealt with by many writers. Hundreds of articles, books, and other means of publication deal with this glorious chapter of the Jewish Zionist history.