

Arik Kerman

The Jewish Refugee Warship



Josiah Wedgwood, caricature by ArieH Navon.

Courtesy of Prof. David Navon

Arik Kerman

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Dedicated to Avigail Kerman

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the valuable professional advice and guidance of Captain Giora Krenkin, merchant marine, Captain Arie Fichman, merchant marine and Commander Yoram Bar Yam, Israeli Navy.

Contents

PROLOGUE **8**

CHAPTER 1 **11**

The Background Story - The Beginning and eEnd of the British Commitment. Lord Wedgwood Supports the Jews

Lieutenant Commander Josiah Wedgwood at the Gallipoli front. Taking an interest in Palestine **11** ■ British-Zionist collaboration, the ideology and the interests. Wedgwood enlists on behalf of the Zionists **17** ■ The Balfour Declaration and its realization at the beginning of the Mandate. Wedgwood: "The government is anti-Zionist" **25** ■ The proposition for partition. Recognizing the defeat of bi-nationalism in Palestine **33** ■ Wedgwood supported illegal immigration, Ben-Gurion objected **34** ■ The "White Paper": Wedgwood's reaction in parliament. The illegal immigration: Organized and unorganized **37** ■ The Jews of America and British policy. The death of Wedgwood **51** ■ One hundred thousand Holocaust refugees and the end of the British Mandate **55** ■

CHAPTER 2 **59**

The Josiah Wedgwood refugee ship - The American Crew and "Aliyah Bet" Activists

Background **59** ■ They can't agree. Ben Gurion and the "Aliyah Bet" activists **64** ■ The warship and the Jewish crew **73** ■ Crossing the ocean **86** ■ Yehuda Arazi, courageous elegant and controversial. The activity in Italy **98** ■ The cool reception for the Jewish crew **104** ■ The Palyamniks in Italy **107** ■ It'll all be fine – The operational problems of the "Aliyah Bet" project **117** ■ Boarding the refugees on the Wedgwood and the escape from Capo di Vado **133** ■ The Story of the drunken Captain **139** ■ The Truth regarding the American Captain. Investigation of the events at Capo di Vado **142** ■ The maneuver **151** ■ The finest hour of the Palyamniks. Sailing to Palestine **157** ■ The goal is to break through to Tel Aviv Beach **164** ■ Trapped by the British destroyers **172** ■ Submitting to Nameri's orders **180** ■ The first deportation to Cyprus **188** ■ Ben Gurion objects again **194** ■ Beside the breakwater **202** ■

CHAPTER 3 **203**

The Israeli Navy: Following the "Palmach" Style

In the personal care of Ben Gurion **203** ■ From a refugee ship to a war ship **207** ■ Two captains on one bridge **210** ■ Altalena **215** ■ The kibbutz ship **221** ■ The guns and the level of gunnery **224** ■ Fighting spirit **226** ■ The battle near Tel Aviv **226** ■ The battle near Ashkelon **230** ■ Ambushing the Egyptian flotilla **235** ■

EPILOGUE **245**

APPENDICES **246**

Appendix A: Crew list **246**

Appendix B: List of Aliyah Bet refugee ships 1945-1948 **248**

BIBLIOGRAPHY **251**

ENDNOTES **257**

LIST OF MAPS

Map 1: Capo di Vado **150**

Map 2: Voyage of the Wedgwood from Italy to Palestine 1946 **201**

Map 3: The sea battle near Tel Aviv, 4th June, 1948 **228**

Map 4: The battle near Ashkelon, 19.10.1948 **234**

Map 5: Israeli ambush of the Egyptian flotilla 1.1.1949 **236**

Prologue

In April 1946, a small warship without any guns sailed from the USA to Europe with a crew of Jewish American volunteers. The purpose of the voyage was to bring Jewish refugees, Holocaust survivors, from Europe to Palestine*, ruled then by the British Mandate. The name of this refugee ship, the *Josiah Wedgwood*, is linked with three different periods in the history of the Israeli state's establishment. This book is divided according to these periods.

The first chapter, the background story, deals with the beginning and end of British commitment to a national home for the Jews, highlighting the issue of illegal Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel, then under a British Mandate. Interwoven throughout this period is the image of the British Member of Parliament, Josiah Wedgwood, who fought for the realization of his country's promise to the Jews, and encouraged the Jewish population in Palestine to resist the decisions of the British Mandate government. This British lord was more radical than the leadership of the Jewish population in the Land of Israel in his opposition to the Mandate government, and supported illegal immigration at a time when Ben-Gurion was against it.

* The name Palestine was derived from the name "Palestina", given by the Romans to the Land of Israel, in Hebrew: "Eretz Israel".

The second chapter deals with the period of Aliyah B^{*}, following the Holocaust, focusing on a description of the war ship that became a refugee ship named the *Josiah Wedgwood* (hereinafter: *Wedgwood*), its voyage from the USA to Palestine via Italy, against a background of disputes between Ben-Gurion and the Aliyah B activists and between the activists themselves, and also dealing with the activists' negative attitude toward the Jewish-American crew of the *Wedgwood*. The Aliyah B activists claimed that the captain had been inebriated and that this had been the reason for the capture of the ship.

The third chapter deals with the period of the War of Independence, during which the *Wedgwood* served as the Israeli navy flagship, when the Israeli navy was established on the foundations of the "Pal Yam", the sea unit of the "Palmach"^{**}.

The fact that Pal Yam provided the foundations for the Israeli navy influenced the navy's functioning as a fighting force in three sea battles in which the navy's ships participated during the War of Independence.

* 'Aliyah' is the Hebrew word for Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel throughout the generations, later to the State of Israel. "'Aliyah Bet'" is the abbreviated name for organized illegal Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel during the British Mandate of Palestine (for those without entry certificates).

** "Palmach" is an acronym for "striking units" in Hebrew, an enlisted armed underground force, subordinate to the "Haganah" which was a sort of civilian militia controlled by the leadership of the Jewish population in Palestine. Members of the "Haganah" focused their efforts on the defense of the settlements in which they lived, some of the members were also enlisted for special missions when necessary. The "Palmach" was associated with the Labor Movement. In opposition there were two other underground forces, the "Etzel" and "Lehi" and which were associated with the Revisionist movement, and were not subordinate to the "Haganah".

Chapter 1

The Background Story

The Beginning and End of the British Commitment
Lord Wedgwood Supports the Jews

Lieutenant Commander Josiah Wedgwood at the Gallipoli front. Taking an interest in Palestine

On the 1st May, 1915, on the sixth day of the British attack on the Gallipoli peninsula, Lieutenant commander Josiah Wedgwood found himself lying, bleeding profusely, on a stretcher with intense pain searing through his wound. Turkish bullets continued to pursue him and showered onto the surrounding rocks. It was impossible to evacuate him at the height of the Turkish counter-attack, and his chances of remaining alive were not strong. There was time to reflect and to consider whether it would not have been preferable to continue the magnificent tradition of his family, and to take his place in the prestigious china factory established by his great-grandfather Josiah Wedgwood in the county of Staffordshire, far from the tumult of battle. His character had apparently been too stormy to allow him to spend his days in the manufacture of classical Greek style china crockery for the tea tables of refined ladies.

In his youth, Wedgwood took up the profession of marine engineering and was employed in the construction of war ships. With the outbreak of the British war against the Boers in South Africa, he left the shipyards of Portsmouth and in 1899 joined British fighters as a captain in the cavalry. At the end of the war he spent an additional two years in South Africa as a government magistrate in a native farming colony. Feeling that he had exhausted his potential in this role, he returned to England to compete for a seat in the British parliament as a Liberal party candidate, and at the age of 34 was appointed as a back-bench Member of Parliament¹.

When the First World War erupted, Wedgwood was 42 years old, this did not prevent him from volunteering for the Royal Naval Volunteers' Service which had just been established by the young First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, and he was even promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Commander. Untrained, lacking equipment² but full of fighting spirit, his division sailed to the shores of Belgium to rescue the Belgians from the jaws of the Germans, but had to retreat by the skin of their teeth. Not long passed before Churchill provided with him a far more daring escapade, to break through the Dardanelles. His idea was to outflank the Germans and to open a second front in the East, to invade the Gallipoli peninsula and to storm the Dardanelles which were blocked by the Turks, and from there to proceed through the Balkans to the German army flank in Europe. Wedgwood did not want to miss this experience. Wedgwood was one of the 484,000 British, Australian, New-Zealander, French and Indian soldiers and the separate Jewish mule battalion that participated in

the fighting. His unit was part of a group of selected fighters who were doomed to take part in the questionable ruse devised by the Admiralty, apparently inspired by the story of the Trojan horse³.

The fighters embarked on the River Clyde coal ship, assuming that the Turks would not suspect a seemingly innocent looking ship; they were transported to the Turkish beach, where they were supposed to land. However, the Turkish soldiers on the beach did not follow the Trojan horse scenario, and the moment that the British soldiers emerged from the ship's belly, they opened heavy fire and killed most of them while they were still on the deck. Only a few of the 2,000 fighters succeeded in reaching the shore and holding on to it, among them Lieutenant Commander Wedgwood and what remained of his unit.

After six days of continuous bloody battles Wedgwood was also among the injured. He was taken to a ship anchored in the bay, and lay on the deck amidst the hundreds of wounded, waiting quietly for someone to come and look after him. Wedgwood could only blame himself for the shameful situation in which he found himself. He had been one of the enthusiastic supporters of the concept of opening a second front in the East, a controversial idea, considered by many people to be a dangerous adventure doomed to failure. Wedgwood was essentially a socialist with a tendency to anarchism. His parliamentary activity largely consisted of a non-compromising struggle on behalf of the weak. Even when his Liberal party was in power, he made their lives difficult. He was always embroiled in battles against the establishment, campaigning for the mentally disabled, or natives in Rhodesia or for an Irish Member of Parliament who had been punished by

being ousted from parliament. He totally ignored party discipline. He did not respect the opinions of the majority in his party, saying that the majority once used to burn witches at the stake. He was renowned for his pugnacious spirit. On one occasion, a member of parliament publicly insulted Wedgwood; he immediately invited him to a duel⁴.

Belligerent creative ideas, which might have a touch of justice, would captivate his heart and he would support them without limit, even if they were not compatible with the Liberal line that he represented. Storming the Turks in the East, in order to relieve the pressure on the Western front, seemed to him to be an excellent strategic move. There was also no need to search too hard for moral justification to attack the Turks, who had breached their treaty with the British and joined their enemy, Germany.

However, the attack in the East also embodied obvious imperialist aspirations. Its followers had set their sights on the Turkish imperial territories, home to the important trade routes to India. The British were also interested in the oil fields that had just been discovered in those territories. With just one thrust of the sword in the area of the Dardanelles, all these could fall like ripe fruit into their hands.

Although these imperialist aspirations were ostensibly incompatible with Wedgwood's Liberal ideology, British Liberals did not differ from the Conservatives when it came to matters touching upon the status of the empire, or the status of British woman – they opposed equal rights⁵. The stalwart imperialist and anti-socialist Winston Churchill⁶ was also then a member of

the Liberal Party. Wedgwood had sensed the scent of battle and became an avid supporter of the assault in the East.

The Manchester Guardian praised Wedgwood's military enlistment indicating that Mr. Wedgwood MP, who had once sported a moustache, was now silk shaven as Lieutenant Commander of the Royal Navy. The reporter noted that if his achievements in the battle field were to resemble his achievements in the House of Commons then he would necessarily be blessed with a fine military career⁷.

The prophesy was realized, and after seven months' military service Lieutenant Commander Wedgwood was returned on a stretcher, decorated with the Distinguished Service Order for his actions on the Gallipoli battlefield. He was promoted to the rank of Colonel.

252,000 casualties were incurred in the campaign, which, in the end, failed because of serious mistakes in military command. Yet the idea was in itself strategically brilliant. If it had succeeded, a matter that was actually achievable according to reports by Turkish commanders, it is almost certain that the weak Turkish Empire, embroiled in disputes, would have abandoned the war. Russia was pressed by the German blockade and the military pressure upon her would be relieved. The threat that would have been created on the German flank in Europe could have brought the war in Europe to an end three years earlier.

Muirhead, the renowned historian, later wrote that the British penetration of the Dardanelle Straits could have created a historical turning point. Muirhead even went further adding that the Communist revolution would not have occurred in Russia and Russia would not have abandoned the war in a separate peace treaty⁸. In the

same spirit, it might be said that the success of the British in Gallipoli would have saved Britain the need to conquer Palestine, and probably the Balfour Declaration would not have been published, and perhaps the State of Israel would never have been established.



Lieutenant commander Josiah Wedgwood.

Reprinted from My Righteous Gentile: Lord Wedgwood and Other Memories by Gabriella Auspitz Labson (New Jersey, 2004)

British-Zionist collaboration, the ideology and the interests. Wedgwood enlists on behalf of the Zionists

As a result of the military disaster at Gallipoli, the concept of the "Eastern Front" became most unpopular among the British public that had been divided between the supporters of the Eastern Front and those who supported the Western Front – in Europe. But not for long. The battle-worn British soldiers who had been evacuated from the peninsula were summoned to Egypt in order to defend the Suez Canal, Britain's most strategic asset, against a Turkish attack. A brave, effective and talented⁹ German colonel organized the Turkish expeditionary force, leading it through Palestine and the Sinai desert to attack the canal at the beginning of 1915. He attacked again a year and a half later, without success, but the British had to bring in more than five divisions to defend the canal. The policy that saw the Sinai desert as an impassable obstacle to protect the Suez Canal was no longer "Bon Ton" for the British cabinet. It seemed that if Britain wanted to retain this essential water passage to India, it would have to capture Palestine in order to protect it.

In the War Ministry, maps of the Middle East were hung up again. For almost a year they deliberated whether to open a new front in the East, and whether to begin in Syria or to capture Palestine; how to placate the local Arab leaders and to distance them from the French; how to hide this from the French, who also had interests in Syria and competed with the British for control of Palestine. One British officer compared these dealings concerning the division of control in the Middle East to hunters who squabble over the bear's skin even before it is killed¹⁰.

The division of control in the Middle East between France and Britain was anchored in the Sykes-Picot agreement that they were careful to hide. Later these powers even declared that the purpose of the war was not to take control of territories, but to liberate small and oppressed peoples¹¹. The promises that the British pledged to the Arabs were shelved in the chasms of archives for many long years, so that the French would not discover how the British had tried to incite the Arabs against them¹². In respect to Palestine, the territory that was intended to be under direct British rule was no larger than a small enclave in the region of Haifa and Acre. Most of Palestine was supposed to be under international jurisdiction.

At the end of 1916 the British government fell and a new government under Lloyd George came into power, bringing with it a new approach to the future of Palestine, which differed from the views of its predecessor. The British government under Lloyd George concluded that with a little creativity, they would be able to exploit the declaration concerning the liberation of small and oppressed peoples to benefit British policies. The government of Lloyd George began to seriously study the benefit that might accrue to the British by allowing the Jews to settle in Palestine under their patronage. Chaim Weizman, a member of the Zionist leadership then living in England had, unsuccessfully, brought this concept to the previous government at the beginning of the war together with Herbert Samuel MP. Weizman now met with Lloyd George, before he became prime minister, with the assistance of the editor of the Manchester Guardian, Charles Scott, an avid supporter of Zionism¹³. During the same period, on a dreary November day in 1915, when the newspapers brought disturbing news from the Western Front

and from the Gallipoli Front, the Manchester Guardian published an article by Beetham, its military analyst, advocating that Palestine should become a barrier state between Egypt and the North, populated by a people fired with fierce patriotic spirit and the entire future of the British empire as a marine empire would rest on the realization of this vision¹⁴. This was the worldview of the article's author and the editor of the newspaper, one of the most important in Britain, which they also ensured would be distributed in conventions and meetings with influential public figures¹⁵. The idea expressed by the military analyst was principally strategic, but it largely suited the approach of a significant proportion of the British public. It combined imperial interests with devout Biblical faith, prevalent among wide sections of Anglo-Saxon communities.

This volume is too short to be able to fully describe the relations between the English people and the Bible, and the people of the Bible. Originally this was influenced by the belief of Christian sects that the thousand year reign of Jesus the Messiah - the "Millennium" - would be preceded by the return of the people of the Bible to the land of the Bible. The most striking expression of this belief was found in the 17th century Puritan revolution in England¹⁶. In the 19th century the British elite again discussed the need to restore the Jews to the Land of Israel and then too this discussion was tinted with religious-moral overtones. During the 1st World War, the British related to the Jewish people from a rational-strategic-political viewpoint, but there is no doubt that underlying these perceptions, the leaders of that period held certain heartfelt inclinations including an affinity with the Bible. The British prime-minister David Lloyd

George was the son of a Puritan family, so was his Foreign Minister, Balfour, and many other people involved in state affairs. The president of the United States at that time, Woodrow Wilson was a descendant of Scottish Puritans¹⁷.

Wedgwood was also a Puritan, as evidenced by his Biblical name Josiah, after Josiah, King of Judah. He became acquainted with the Jewish people through Bible stories learned in his childhood. Hearing about Zionism at one of the meetings that then took place in London, he adopted it enthusiastically. He too related to Zionism in the context of British interests, but when he spoke about Zionism he would quote the British poet Robert Browning: "The Lord will have mercy on Jacob yet, and again in his border see Israel set"¹⁸.

Wedgwood was not really considered a member of the government because of his radicalism and rebellious character. He defined himself as a "philosophical anarchist"¹⁹. Nevertheless, his senior status in parliament and his rhetoric powers awarded him significant influence. The British press loved to cite him. He was known as "Colonel Wedgwood", because of his military past and because of his fighting spirit, and was even well-known in the American press, that aligned him with luminaries such as Bernard Shaw and Bertrand Russell. One newspaper indicated that he was perfectly willing and skilled to deliver a speech that could destroy all the arguments of an opponent²⁰. When Weizman discerned these characteristics, he enrolled Wedgwood to appear at conventions and meetings in Britain and throughout the world, enlisting people to Zionism. The fiercest opponents, whom he could not convince, were, perversely, assimilated anti-Zionist Jews. They shied away from Zionism, fearing that their Jewishness would become more noticeable