

# No HOLLYWOOD Movie

Jonathan Fishburn on the Cypriot detention camps where Jews prepared for life in Palestine

The island of Cyprus, madam. World famous for beauty and long, tragic history. Been conquered many times. Conquered by Phoenicians, Assyrians, Persians, Macedonians. Also conquered by Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Turks. Purchased from Turkey by your esteemed self, the British Empire. All Cyprus most fond of the British.

I'm an American.

Fond of Americans also. We Cypriots are fond of everybody.

Shall we go through the castle now?

No, I've changed my mind.

Then maybe the Tower of Othello at the harbour of Famagusta. It's included in the tour.

All right.

What's the matter here?

Prison ship has arrived full of Jews for the camps, madam.

What camps?

Detention camps out at Karaolos. You see, the Jews, they charter a ship from Europe to get to Palestine. Then the British catch the ship and send the whole bunch here.

— opening scene, *Exodus* the movie

When Paul Newman and Eva Marie Saint prepared for their roles in *Exodus* (1960), the movie based on the Leon Uris novel of 1958 that chronicled the fate of a ship carrying Holocaust refugees from Europe to Palestine, it's unlikely they read any copies of *Al Hasaf* or *LeMarchav*. These newspapers, written by the internees of the Cyprus detention camps between 1946 and 1949, portray the daily life of inmates, unclear about their future and desperate to get to Palestine.

In the chaos after the war, the refusal of the British authorities to allow Jewish Holocaust refugees into Palestine has been well documented. Operation Igloo (suitably ironic given the heat of Cyprus) referred to the government's plan to refuse entry to Jews arriving in Palestine and was put in place when the first detention camps were opened in August 1946 in Karaolos, near Famagusta, and in the Larnaca district. From 1946 till May 1948, 52,549 people, including 1,064 infants born in Cyprus, were detained in these two camp areas. The final departure of internees for Israel took place on 11

February 1949, by which time another 861 babies had been born.

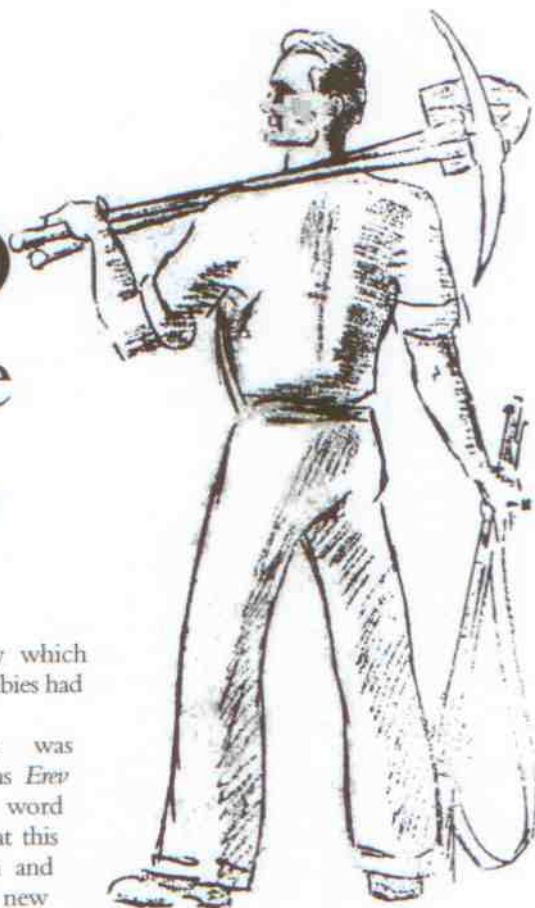
While Cyprus was poetically known as *Erev Eretz Yisrael*, the word 'erev' intimating that this was all preparation and anticipation for a new life in Palestine, life in the detention camps was no Hollywood movie. A governmental 'Report on the Hygiene and Sanitation of Illegal Jewish Immigrants, Karalos' in October 1946 commented that:

The immigrants themselves are mostly healthy young adults. The majority have spent a considerable time in enemy concentration camps and are experienced in resistance both passive and active; are very allergic (sic) to any form of order or authority and utterly lacking in the most elementary principles of camp sanitation or hygiene. They are in the main, most unco-operative... A great lack of effort has been shown in keeping the camp clean and tidy. Meals are, for the most part, eaten in tents, and personal ablutions performed there from tins, buckets, etc. Food debris, sanitary towels and dirty water are thrown into the surrounding bushes. Refuse containers are frequently tipped onto the ground...

A year later, as Golda Meir wrote in *My Life* (New York: Putnam, 1975), not much had improved:

The camps themselves were even more depressing than I expected... they looked like prison camps, ugly clusters of huts and tents — with a watchtower at each end — set down on the sand, with nothing green or growing anywhere in sight. There wasn't nearly enough water for drinking and even less for bathing, despite the heat.

Despite these physical difficulties, welfare services provided by the Joint were complemented by educational and cultural programmes developed by the internees and further supported by the work of the Rutenberg Foundation of Haifa, whose director, Baruch



Rubinstein, was a member of the famed cosmetics family. When he visited Cyprus, he brought over teachers, mimeograph machines and useful paraphernalia to help develop the cultural life of the camps. Among the few records remaining from these activities are the rare newsletters, songbooks and teaching materials I recently acquired from an Israeli source, and easily identified by datelines referring to *Kafrisin* (Cyprus in Hebrew).

The weekly paper, *Al Hasaf*, was a mine of educational information geared towards preparing young adults for life in Israel. Mayer Newman, brother of the well-known folklore expert Dov Newman (Dov Noy), was an internee. As a musician, composer and chorus master, he decided to produce a Cyprus songbook – *Shiron Kafrisin*. Its cover shows a staff of barbed wire transformed into musical notes; inside are many handwritten melodies composed inside the camps. A Chanukah booklet includes the traditional *Ma'oz Tzur* song, but it is also used to make the political point that the internees identified with persecuted Jews through the ages and that these detention camps were the latest examples of persecution.

A two-page mimeograph with a handwritten title, 'General School Party in Cyprus – Carolos', lists the running order for the end-of-school celebrations with songs and playlets. The timetable of classes included many hours of Hebrew language instruction and study of the Land of Israel and, given the demanding end-of-



year exams (1.5 hours Bible, 1.5 hours Literature and 1 hour on the History of Israel), I imagine the party was well-deserved. Many of the publications have a page of *Ivrit Kalah* – easy Hebrew with vowels to facilitate language acquisition for the transition to Israel.

Items written after May 1948 have an added poignancy – Israel had been established, many of the internees had left for Israel, and yet many others were unable to leave the camps until they were finally evacuated in February 1949. The frustration must have been enormous: much of the writing in this period is a reflection on their time in the camps – in a sense documenting their experiences for future historians. The front cover of a Yiddish paper produced in August 1948 is emblazoned with a picture of the new Jew holding a gun in one hand and a scythe in the other. A newspaper dated 3 November 1948 reflects on the 31 years since the Balfour Declaration was signed on 2 November 1917.

In *Exodus* the movie, and in real life, when the United Nations voted for the partition of Palestine, the hostilities increased, yet Kitty Freemont, the American nurse we met in the opening lines of this article, remained by Paul Newman's side. Kitty has taken Karen, a young refugee girl, under her wing and is devastated when she hears of her death at the hands of terrorists from Gaza. It is the echoes of Karen's hopes back in Cyprus that Kitty holds on to:

Kitty, we're going to Palestine.  
Karen, you don't know what it's like in Palestine. And the British won't let you go, anyhow.  
They'll have to, Kitty. They'll just have to, because we're not going back to Karaolos, not ever.

Quotes and statistical information on the camps are taken from Stavros Pantehi, *Place of Refuge: A History of the Jews in Cyprus* (Elliot and Thompson, 2003).

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