

## Introduction

Israeli agents of Haganah — the main Jewish underground in Palestine — purchased in the United States in spring of 1948 the cargo ship *S.S. Kefalos* to smuggle arms into Israel. The vessel was registered in Panama under the ownership of the fictitious Manuel Enterprises, Inc., an Israeli shell company. The daring plan was to sail the vessel from New York to Tampico, Mexico, to load the arms and transport them from that port to Israel. The crew of the *Kefalos* was heavily composed of Spanish Republican refugees and Spanish was one of the predominant languages aboard. The *Kefalos* sailed from New York on 13 June and arrived in Tampico under false pretenses eleven days later (24 June). Loaded with arms, the vessel then left Tampico on 3 August, though it quickly changed its name and appearance in an attempt to elude British vigilance when it crossed Gibraltar and U.N. Observers in Tel Aviv. The ship's new name was revealing: it was re-baptized the *S.S. M[artin] A[lonso] Pinzon*, named after Columbus's navigator. Throughout the secret operation there was extensive cooperation between seemingly disparate diasporas. Jews (Israeli, European, North American, and Mexican) worked closely with Spanish crew members, many of them Basque, to assure the success of the enterprise. The Israeli code name for the vessel was *Dromit* ("southerner"; Dromi was an alias for Mexico). The ship arrived in Israel thirty-five days later on 8 September 1948 and quickly unload-

ed vitally needed arms. Israeli authorities then decided to reconvert the *Kefalos* to a semblance of a passenger ship to rescue Jews stranded in the Balkans. Restructured in Naples in September-October, 1948, the vessel then made two voyages from Bakar (modern-day Croatia) to Haifa in late 1948 with over 7,700 refugees. All this seems straightforward and simple enough now, but six years ago I ignored nearly all but the most basic facts of the improbable saga of the rust bucket, as it was endearingly known to many of those who sailed aboard it.

At the heart of this book are two fundamental questions: a logistical and military one (the transport and smuggling of arms for Israel's War of Independence); and a humanitarian one (the rescue of Jewish refugees in the Balkans). The monograph examines how each of the objectives was successfully accomplished. To do this it was essential to have excellent coordination, from Haganah's organizational leadership at the top, to a veteran and skilled captain, down to a loyal and adept, and politically committed crew whose sympathies for the Israeli cause never wavered. The monograph also makes the case that the *Kefalos* enjoyed a good measure of luck at crucial times in its voyages. In sum, this work aims to cast light on the procurement of arms by Israel during the War of Independence, on post-Holocaust refugee issues, and on the cooperation between disparate Jewish and Spanish Republican diasporas. But there is another significant — if not always apparent — facet to the odyssey of the *Kefalos* that transcends the juncture of events in 1948: the intersection of Spanish and Jewish cultures across time and space. Perhaps the best example of the persistence on this *longue durée* is revealed by the fact that during one of the trips from the Balkans to Israel, some of the Jewish refugees conversed with the Spanish crew in Ladino (medieval and early modern Judeo-Spanish). This continuity was also powerfully displayed in an anecdote vividly recalled by my father: after unloading its arms, and as the ship was getting to leave Tel Aviv on 12 September, and the plank was being raised to leave, someone on shore yelled out to him "*adiós paisano!*" in perfect Castilian.

I have known about the *Kefalos* since I was a child. My father, Carlos Blanco Aguinaga, a crew member, would sometimes talk about it but never extensively or in detail. Still, it was clear to the family that his journey aboard this vessel had been an important

chapter of his youth. And yet, strangely, he had no photographs of the *entire* ship even though he had two very hazy ones from a small newspaper clipping of the freighter in Tampico and another photograph of the crew on deck during a safety drill (photograph 34). In spring 2008 I was teaching a course on nineteenth-twentieth century Spain, and sometime in late March or early April, I was discussing the end of the Spanish Civil War, always for me a sad undertaking. During one of the classes I explained to my students the Republican exile to Latin America and to Mexico in particular. To illustrate the matter more fully, I showed some photographs of the ships like the *Sinaia* that had taken the refugees to their destination in the New World. In my search I somehow had the idea of finding a photograph of the *Kefalos*.

In the era of the Internet this surely would prove an easy endeavor, and yet it was not. And what started, innocently enough, as a straightforward quest, turned into a major historical investigation that has lasted six years and consumed a great deal of my life. If Jonah was swallowed by a whale, I was swallowed by the *Kefalos*. But I confess not to regret a single moment of the time I have spent researching the boat, even when it put on hold other ongoing and nearly completed projects. In many respects, as I delved more and more deeply into the odyssey of the ship with three names, I was able to reconstruct and relive the many facets of the vessel's implausible journey. Along the way I not only learned about matters profoundly alien to this early modern historian, but during the investigation, I met a number of fascinating individuals who have guided my work and provided me with important first-hand information on some of the principals of the *Kefalos's* story.

One of the first things I had to do was to accurately identify the ship's captain, Adolph S. Oko, Jr. When my search for Captain Oko began, I completely overlooked the 'Jr.' part, even when my father's discharge papers read A. S. Oko, Jr, though, in my defense, a feeble one at that, the 'Jr.' is completely inside of, and overlapped by, the ship's official seal, making the reading unclear. So I Googled away endlessly, looking for Adolph S. Oko, and of course repeatedly encountered the captain's father, Adolph Sigmund Oko, the celebrated bibliographer and Spinoza scholar associated for so many years with Hebrew Union College. Of course there was another Adolph

Sigmund Oko, but his papers at the Bancroft Library failed to show that he was the son of the famous librarian at Cincinnati. Eventually, I figured out that there were indeed two Okos. But confirmation of this arrived through an improbable source: the Inverness Yacht Club (Marin County, California). According to the Club's web page, "Oko had proved himself an audacious sailor on waters deeper and wider than Tomales Bay. After World War II, he ran the British blockage of the Mediterranean in his rust bucket, the *Kefalos*." Armed with this information, not entirely correct by the way, I contacted the Club and received a gracious, helpful reply from one of Captain Oko's friends and associates, Edward Von Der Porten, who not only provided important information on 'Oke,' as his wife and many of his friends fondly called him, but also furnished me with a transcript of an important lengthy taped interview that Edward and his wife Saryl had conducted with Oko in December, 1960. Several extremely significant leads and finds followed in short order.

Now that I had identified the correct Oko, I set out to gather additional facts about him. A natural start was through his father's records; I contacted the American Jewish Archives and inquired. In May, 2008, the AJA replied that they had nothing in the collections of Oko Sr. regarding his son, but added that the Archives held "a microfilm [...] which contains correspondence and papers relating to the rescue of European Jews by Captain and Mrs. Adolph Oko — 1948–1949." Moreover, the microfilm was accompanied by obituaries, editorial comments, and twenty-seven photos of the *Kefalos* that had belonged to the Okos. Once I obtained the materials on loan, it became immediately clear that this was a discovery of the highest order. Not only did I now have excellent photographs of the ship, I also possessed one of the main foundations of the investigation.

Also in April-May, 2008, while looking for the *Kefalos*, I established my first contact with Commander Yehuda Ben-Tzur, a veteran of the War of Independence, a retired Israeli naval officer, and a former director of the Israeli Defense Forces Naval Academy. Commander Ben-Tzur, is one of the co-directors of Palyam.org, a "site dedicated to preserving the heritage of the Palyam & Aliya Bet." I was initially attracted to the page by a brief piece on the *Kefalos* written by Ben-Tzur himself. My association with Yehuda Ben-Tzur has proven invaluable; a bottomless pit of information and knowledge,

and an individual of seemingly endless contacts, he has served as my guide and mentor of all matters related to the war as well as to numerous aspects of Israeli society and government during the 1940s and 50s. Not only has Yehuda been extremely generous with his time despite his many other commitments, he has provided me with important facts that have vastly enhanced this project and enriched my understanding of complex matters that were well beyond my initial state of comprehension. And he has not been shy about correcting my mistakes or wrong-headed assumptions when it was required. Despite the physical distance that separates us, we have been in constant contact through e-mail. In fact, along with my father, the three of us have exchanged hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of communications since beginning our joint collaboration in the spring of 2008.

After an in-depth consultation of the materials from the AJA was completed, leads multiplied, and what began as a trickle became a torrent of information. Through Ancestry.com I was able to develop hundreds of leads on numerous facets of the crew: prior sailing histories, ages, personal information, nationalities, places of birth, and so on. Also through this site and its web of interlocking references, I began to piece together important parts of the lives of Captain Oko and his wife Gladys. Many of the missing biographical facts of their lives I slowly filled in with countless queries to state vital records offices, articles and publications, newspapers and obituaries, local libraries, and friends and acquaintances. Of course, as is so often the case in historical research, there were many dead ends, but fortunately also innumerable leads that led seamlessly directly to other vital information. Such was the case, for example, of the ship itself.

Once I was able to ascertain some basic facts about the vessel's origins, owners, travels, transfers and sales, and overall history, I could verify many key elements of the *Kefalos* through patient inquiries at the National Records Administration (NARA). The NARA's very helpful, if overworked, staff provided invaluable details of the ship, particularly during WWII and its transfer to new owners after the War. It took some doing, but with the help of NARA and sites devoted to maritime matters, I was able to trace with a fair degree of exactitude the entire history of the *Kefalos* from its construction to its scrapping in 1963. Other federal and state government agencies an-

swered my petitions for documentary assistance. For example, I requested, and obtained, from the U.S. Coast Guard the service records of Oko during 1942-1946. And since I knew from the secondary literature that several individuals connected to the *Kefalos* enterprise had been indicted and tried for violations of the Neutrality Act and other federal provisions, I filed numerous Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) petitions with the FBI for documents related to many of the individuals in question. Though often heavily redacted, and often slow in arriving, the FBI files proved an extraordinary source of information on the ship, its crew, and how the arms it smuggled to Israel had been secured in Hawaii and in Mexico by Haganah operatives through a variety of legal and illegal means.

However, not all the documents have been gathered through the Internet or received in regular mail. In early 2009 and 2010, I consulted twice in person several important trials at NARA (Laguna Niguel, California). And in the summer of 2009, I found and researched the captain's extensive personal papers at the Bancroft Library in Berkeley. These holdings include drafts of an unfinished book manuscript about the *Kefalos* that Captain Oko started to write in 1957-8 but never completed. Titled "And It Was So," this work contains a wealth of information not found elsewhere. But these two important collections were not the only ones to hold crucial sources on the vessel. In the course of the investigation, other essential documents came to light, notably at NARA, the Haganah Archives, the Central Zionist Archives, the Palmach Archives, and in public and private Spanish collections. For example, through contacts with local and municipal archives in the Basque region, I have obtained significant information on a handful of crew members. To give the reader an idea of the sheer quantity of documents gathered so far, as of this writing, there are now three large boxes of hard copies and files, close to 6,000 e-mails exchanged between myself, my father, Yehuda Ben-Tzur and numerous other entities, and close to one hundred folders of *Kefalos*-related materials in my computers' hard drives.

One of the most satisfying results of the research has been the collection of important photographic evidence. A substantial number of original photographs have been gathered for this book. Drawn mostly from private collections, the vast majority of them have never been seen or studied. Many of the photographs are stun-

ningly beautiful, especially those taken by the Okos primarily on the voyage from Tampico to Tel Aviv, as well as other expressive ones of the refugees by the Okos and other photographers on the journeys from the Balkans to Israel. There are also a number of unrelated, unidentified photographs of unknown provenance. In all, there are approximately some sixty to seventy photographs, including newspaper ones. I've had to make hard choices on which ones to select for this book, and therefore have limited myself to a small number of photographs that illustrate and enrich key points of the narrative.

For the most part this book follows a straightforward chronological order. Chapter 1 traces the history of the *Kefalos* from its construction to its transfer to Israeli ownership (1917-1949). The prominent role of the vessel as the *S.S. Larranga* during WWII is underscored. Chapter 2 examines the intertwined lives of Oko and Gladys. The couple was inseparable from the time they met in the early 1930s until Oko's death in 1963. At chapter's end I discuss the important document titled "Instructions to Master." This was a set of orders likely given to Oko in New York by Teddy Kollek, at the time the chief Haganah operative in the U.S., amidst much cloak-and-dagger secretiveness. The instructions were effectively the captain's operational orders for the mission. Years later, Oko reviewed the yellowing, two-page list, and remarked critically, if with a touch of nostalgia, that it read like a "dime novel [...] so obvious and awkward." After the crew enlisted formally before the Panamanian consul, the ship — code-named *Dromit* by Haganah — left New York on 13 June ostensibly for South America (Buenos Aires or Montevideo), one of the numerous subterfuges employed by Israeli operatives during the enterprise.

Chapter 3 details the ship's lengthy, and largely involuntary, stay in Tampico and the manner in which Haganah's network procured arms by all necessary means. This chapter begins with the ship's eventful forty-day stopover in Tampico (24 June-3 August). The *Kefalos* had arrived at port under patently questionable circumstances, alleging the need for repairs and special parts. Newspaper publicity in mid-July torpedoed all secrecy, resulting in widespread public scandal and controversy. The U.S. government had substantial intelligence on the doings of the *Kefalos*. Adding to the captain's troubles, many of the arms were late in arriving at Tampico, and

he suffered from dysentery during most of his stay there. After all the preparations had at last been finalized, according to the list prepared by the captain, the ship carried thirty-six crew members and two passengers upon departure, and the vessel left Tampico with a substantial cargo of arms and sugar. Significantly, with patently false port documents, the vessel departed for Shanghai, via Genoa, still officially as the *Kefalos*, even though there's substantial evidence that many, including the captain, had begun to refer to the ship as the *M.A. Pinzon*. While Oko and the crew waited impatiently at Tampico, from Hawaiian salvage yards to Mexican armories, Haganah operatives had obtained a sizeable arms cargo through a variety of ways, ranging from outright theft to purchases secured and/or accompanied by bribes to Mexican officials. Among the best known of these actions was the celebrated *Idalia* episode. In a caper worthy of a Hollywood B-movie thriller, Herman "Hank" Greenspun commandeered a schooner owned by Leland R. Lewis in Wilmington/San Pedro, California, loaded it with arms stolen in Hawaii, and with a total crew of five, forced it to travel to Acapulco, Mexico, where the cargo was unloaded with the assistance of the Mexican Navy. The arms were then trans-shipped by train to Tampico, along with other armament procured in Mexico City.

Chapter 4 explores the ship's crew, one which by all accounts had a markedly Spanish Republican flavor. (Through painstaking research, as of this writing, I have been able to gather biographical data on thirty-four of the thirty-eight crew members and passengers on the way to Israel.) Over half of the crew was composed of Spanish refugees (many of them Basques), and Spaniards traveling with Latin American passports. In a possible overstatement, but a highly significant one, according to Captain Oko, Spanish was the freighter's predominant language. My father often acted on board the ship as a translator between Spanish and English speakers. Nearly all testimonies are unanimous in underscoring the loyalty and discipline of the Spanish crew during the mission. To the captain's enormous regret, one of the Spaniards he admired most, Mariano Manresa, was ill with cancer, and even though he traveled from New York to Tampico aboard the ship, his condition forced him to abandon plans to make the journey to Israel as he wanted and planned to do. This chapter also discusses another important element of the crew: the



five Jewish individuals recruited and placed on the ship by Haganah. They were Al Ellis, Robert Keller, Arie Kesselman, Nathaniel Ratner, and Jack Rothman. Of the five only Rothman, the radio operator, had been on board since New York. The others joined the ship at Tampico. It is important to note that Ellis and Ratner had been part of the *Idalia* crew. Though their role and significance on board are subject to a good deal of conjecture, it seems evident that Haganah wanted to maintain a strong presence on the *Kefalos*, probably to keep an eye on Captain Oko, an independent-minded and strong-willed individual who was not entirely trusted by the Israelis.

Chapter 4 also provides an account of the long thirty-five day voyage to Tel Aviv, how the ship's appearance was transformed by the carpenter in an attempt to fool the British; its slow, steady speed (8.5 knots an hour), and the daily tedium of life on board. There were important questions in everyone's mind of what might happen when the *Kefalos* crossed Gibraltar, and yet, to universal relief among the crew, the British let it pass without incident. But even after Gibraltar, the voyage was not without danger. Near Pantelleria — a small island roughly midway between Tunisia and Sicily — the vessel nearly crashed into some shoals when it accidentally strayed off course. The captain's log shows that he charted a careful course for Israel to avoid the most obvious perils. However, other difficulties quickly arose: there were radio problems and Israeli listening stations lost all contact with the ship, causing a mad scramble among Israeli officials to locate it. Additionally, the ship experienced severe water and fuel shortages; with some of the gauges nearly on zero, the vessel arrived in Tel Aviv on 8 September. The freighter's valuable cargo was quickly unloaded: arms were taken to shore rapidly and at night; sugar was carried to land slowly and at daytime. The much-needed arms were rushed to the Negev where they played a decisive role in Israeli operations. The ship hurriedly left Israeli on 12 September amid suggestions of impending additional U.N. inspections that might well have turned up violations of the Second Truce. As a footnote, Israeli officials gave stern orders that the name *Pinzon* was not to be mentioned again. That did not prevent Israeli officials to continue calling the vessel the *Pinzon* for some time, and Captain Oko later to refer to *himself* as the master, not of the *Kefalos*, but of the "S.S. *Martin Alonzo* [sic] *Pinzon*."

Chapter 5 explores an important change in the ship's mission. There were significant disputes among Israeli officials about the vessel's future. After heated discussions, they decided to change the use and purpose of the *Kefalos*. Instead of carrying arms, the rust bucket would be used to transport passengers. Dispatched to Naples quickly, the *Kefalos* spent fifty days in that port (22 September–8 November); there it was retrofitted to carry people. As in Tampico, the lengthy stay in Naples was not without complications; numerous expenses were approved by the captain and Israeli aides, and bills rapidly piled up. Predictably, Oko's frustrations due to delays and conflicts with Israel's representatives in Italy resulted in continual tensions — frictions with loose ends that lasted for years. In a surprising development, while the *Kefalos* was undergoing substantial transformations and repairs, the real M/V *Pinzon* arrived in Naples, where the two ships coexisted for a couple days. At least one other important event occurred for the *Kefalos* at that port: while taking the ship to open waters for a test practice to ascertain its seaworthiness, the *Kefalos* encountered an Israeli chartered arms ship, the M/V *Scio*, in severe difficulties. The *Kefalos* towed it to Naples, earning in process some money as well as the gratitude of Haganah officials. Naples also saw some changes in the personnel. As several crew members left for other destinations, some of them were replaced by other Spaniards recruited from Campo Bagnoli in Naples, a camp for displaced persons administered by the International Organization of Refugees.

Chapter 6 delves into the two rescues of refugees or immigrants (*olim*) in Bakar. During the first one (8–23 November), the vessel traveled around the 'boot' of Italy and up the Adriatic, arriving in Split-Bakar (present-day Croatia). At the latter port over 4,000 came on board. It was during this difficult journey with extremely poor conditions on board that, according to the captain, Spanish crew members conversed in Ladino with some refugees. Despite the travails, there were numerous positive aspects of the refugees' conduct during voyage: social harmony, music, marriages and births. But shortly after leaving Bakar, a strong storm kicked up, and Captain Oko, fearing that the vessel was not sea worthy, and worried about the passengers' safety, took shelter off the Italian coast. The refugees insisted on proceeding directly to Israel, but the captain resisted their demands. The captain, with Nathaniel Ratner's assistance, overcame

the attempted takeover and near mutiny by olim, and ship arrived safely in Haifa.

This chapter also surveys the second rescue of refugees (28 November–25 December). This trip to the Balkans was quite possibly more eventful than the first. The ship arrived in Bakar on 8 December. There the vessel waited several days for the first group of refugees to arrive. A host of complications and dangers at port ensued. The *Kefalos* was ordered by local authorities to leave the dock where it was moored to make room for another ship, an arms vessel. Ranner and Oko employed a host of delaying tactics to ensure that no refugee was left behind. All refugees came on board and the ship sailed before a port ultimatum expired. The *Kefalos* left overloaded, with horrendous conditions on board, and amidst a raging storm. The sea eventually calmed, but a voyage of eight days under normal conditions took nearly eleven. There were complaints about food, and even a threatened hunger strike by the refugees. Again Ranner played a key role in quieting things down. The refugees arrived weakened and battered when the *Kefalos* put into Haifa on Christmas Night, 25 December. According to Oko, nearly 3,800 olim arrived on the second voyage. During the two trips from the Balkans the ship had rescued 7,737 refugees. This chapter also briefly details the ship's final days under Oko's orders. In early January, 1949, with the vessel still at Haifa, Oko was "requested" by Israeli shipping officials to hand command of the *Kefalos* — also pointedly called *Pinzon* in parenthesis — to Captain Joseph Golandski. After transfer from Panamanian to Israeli registry, the vessel quickly officially became the *Dromit*. The crew's outstanding pay was settled at the same time at Haifa.

The conclusion examines the reasons for the mission's favorable outcome. Chiefly, it was the close cooperation between Jewish and Spanish Republican diasporas that ensured the success of the *Kefalos's* military and humanitarian goals. Overall, it was an impressive operation, one assisted by a combination of significant factors and circumstances: imaginative and bold planning, excellent coordination and financing, the crew's unbending dedication and enormous sailing skill, and more than a fair amount of good fortune. Finally, the book closes with a brief epilogue of the aftermath of the *Kefalos* saga and the fate of some of its main protagonists: Oko and Gladys,

the crew, the American Jewish volunteers and the Haganah operatives and their associates in the United States.

Even though I hope that this modest book advances our understanding of the vessel's extraordinary adventure, while casting light on larger historical issues, it is evident that there's much we ignore about a host of key ancillary matters. For example, how was it that so many Spanish Republican sailors (Basques in particular) came to sympathize with the Israeli cause? What did most of the crew do after the ship's journeys came to an end? Why did the Mexican government decide to assist Israel — even if admittedly under the table, and with more than a fair amount of questionable motives? What was the precise role of Mexican officials in this arms procurement process? Why is the bibliography virtually non-existent on U.S. government trials of those tried for a host of violations of the Neutrality Act and other provisions? Why the deafening silence on these matters when some of the most flagrant arms smuggling transgressions were related to the vessel at the heart of this book? These and other pertinent interrogatives await investigators; their findings will undoubtedly augment considerably our knowledge of the odyssey of the ship with three names.