



A boatful of Refugees that did manage to defy the British and landed at Haifa Port in pre-State Palestine.

THE MAURITIUS INTERNEES

By L. Beitz

130 A
(GA)
Mauritius

Much has been written about the tragic fate of the "The S.S. Patria" with the terrible loss of life, when it was sunk off the coast of Palestine. Less is known of the boat-load of Jews, from many parts of Europe, who came to Palestine, only to be herded on to a British naval vessel and sent to Mauritius to be interned until after the war. As one, who played a very small part in their history, I want to relate what I know of it.

In the summer of 1920, my family returned to Lithuania from Russia, where we had been exiles since April 1915. We found accommodation in a block of flats, not far from a railway station. Almost diagonally across the street there lived a family by name of Birger. They had three sons, the middle one a year older than I and the youngest a year younger. Being of an age, we became friends. They lived in a big house, standing in an enormous

orchard, in which they had every kind of fruit that grew in Lithuania — cherries, red currants, gooseberries, apples, and pears. It was a paradise for us youngsters, and we spent most of the summer vacations with them.

In 1924 I left Lithuania for Palestine. Later I came to South Africa and settled in Johannesburg in 1935. I was married then, with an 18 months old son. With the outbreak of world-war II contact with Lithuania ceased. We had no idea as to what was happening there, we only heard rumours, which we didn't want to believe.

One day we received a letter from Mauritius addressed to L. Beitz, Johannesburg, South Africa. The letter was from I. Birger the younger of my childhood friends and was dated June 1940. In the letter, he explained how he came to be in Mauritius.

It appears, that a year before the war broke out, he was sent there by

the company for whom he worked, "Bata", which had a branch on the island, selling not only the footwear they manufactured, but acting also as general factors, (similar to the Hudson-Bay Co in Canada) and conducting an import and export business with Europe.

At the beginning of 1940, a boatload of Jewish people from different parts of Europe, who had hoped to go to Palestine, in order to escape the fate that they knew awaited them arrived off the port of Haifa. Prohibited from landing by the British Authorities, they were put aboard a British Naval vessel, and immediately deported to Mauritius where they were placed in an internment camp. No one was permitted to see them, but my friend Isia (as we called him), being friendly with the Commandant of the camp, and speaking fluent French, and being also the only Jew on the island, got permission to visit them. In his letter to us he described the terrible conditions under which the internees were living. He wrote that there were among them, a number of professional people, doctors, dentists, tradesmen, musicians. But they all lacked the instruments, to practise their skills. He asked if I could do something to help.

I immediately began to make inquiries as to the cost and availability of the items that were required, but soon realised that they were far beyond my means. I then decided to

approach the SA Jewish Board of Deputies.

The Board responded handsomely and spared no effort or cost to meet their needs.

There were a number of elderly and sick people among the internees, who unfortunately did not live long enough to be released, and about 120 passed away in the camp. They were interred in a corner of the local cemetery.

When the war ended, the internees were released. They left the island and settled in different parts of the world, but they made it a tradition to get together for a reunion every 5 years in Israel, their original destination.

Mr I Birger, on his periodic visits to Johannesburg, contacts us and invariably spends a Sunday or evening with us. He tells us about some of the reunions he has attended. The biggest task he has been confronted with recently was to put up a stone wall, round the Jewish part of the cemetery, and to attend to some of the headstones that had fallen over and the South Africa Jewish Board still bears the largest part of the expense of maintaining the cemetery. If I am not mistaken. Isia Birger told me that he is still the only Jew in Port-Louis, the main town on Mauritius.

To express their gratitude the internees have inscribed The Board and Isia Birger in the "Golden Book" of the Jewish National Fund.

Thanks to our Advertising Patrons

We wish to express our appreciation to all our advertisers who have identified themselves with our Israel's 38th Anniversary issue.

We extend to them our very best wishes.

from:

**Editorial and Advertising Staff
JEWISH AFFAIRS**

130^A (

Mauri

Mauritians

honoured

Citizen 31/9/1988

P13. by Jews

Citizen Reporter

JEWs from around the world will gather in Mauritius later this month to honour non-Jewish islanders who have preserved a Jewish cemetery there since the Second World War.

During the war, a group of Jewish refugees, fleeing Nazi persecution arrived in Palestine, but were deported by the British authorities and arrived in Mauritius in December 1940.

Some of these refugees died on the island and the remainder returned to Palestine after the war.