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# THE KLADOVO-ŠABAC AFFAIR (TWO BOOKS AND A THIRD REFLECTION)

By Chaim Schatzker

## Introduction

Separated by the space of a year and a distance of thousands of miles, two books were published – one in Israel and the other in Austria – devoted to the Kladovo-Šabac affair, one of the least known episodes in the Holocaust period.<sup>1</sup>

In the introduction to the one of these books, the one in Hebrew, the authors define the parameters of the affair: “This book tells the story of 1,000 illegal immigrants who left from or via Vienna for Palestine in November 1939. In April 1941, they returned and fell into Nazi hands in Yugoslavia, and were never to complete their *aliya* journey. Their twenty months, stay in Yugoslavia, first in the village of Kladovo and then in the town of Šabac, gave this group its name and their bitter fate the title, “The Kladovo-Šabac Affair.” What happened to them, as a story of the life and death of European Jewry in the Holocaust period, runs from forced migration and expulsion on the eve of the war and in its initial moments to planned mass murder, the Final Solution.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> H. Weiner and D. Ofer, *Kladovo-Šabac Affair—The Illegal Voyage That Did Not Arrive*, Am Oved Publishers, Tel Aviv, 1992 (Hebrew); G. Anderl and W. Manoschek, *Gescheiterte Flucht, Der Jüdische Kladovo Transport auf dem Weg nach Palastina, 1939-1942*, Verlag für Gesellschaftskritik, Wien, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Weiner-Ofer, p. 13.

More than that, the book touches on certain aspects of the relations between the Jewish community in Palestine and the Diaspora during the Holocaust and on the organization of the clandestine immigration, and details the positions of the transit countries, Britain above all, which tried to prevent this illegal immigration. The complexity of these factors had a decisive effect on the fate of the Kladovo-Šabac journey.

The second book, in German, opens with almost the same words: "This book tells the story of the transport of refugees in the period between November 1939 and spring 1942. It conveys a report on the fate of a group of more than 1,000 people who had one thing in common. They were Jews, or were turned into "Jews" by the Nuremberg Laws, thereby being exposed to the persecutions of the National Socialists. For the most part, they came from Austria, but also from Germany and Czechoslovakia, and they tried desperately to flee their persecutors. To reach this goal, they were ready to risk a flight full of dangers and uncertainty."<sup>3</sup> This book, too, mentions in its introduction Britain's firm stance, as well as the Mossad, the secret arm of the Zionist Workers Movement, that had been set up especially for this purpose" of illegal immigration, the difficulty in obtaining boats and the objection of the transit countries.

The two books relate, again in their respective introductions, the activity of the Revisionist movement starting in January 1939, of the Mossad for Aliya Bet illegal immigrant that year, and of the private organizers of clandestine immigration, and they state that by the beginning of the war, more than 17,000 immigrants reached the shores of Palestine this way.

Still, "the whole affair was one of the saddest chapters in the history of the clandestine immigration/ never did the its organizers suffer such a searing failure: a group of illegal immigrants that set out under the direct authority of the Mossad not only did not reach Palestine but were wiped out by the Nazis, even though the ports of embarkation in Europe were not closed to Jewish immigrants and even though more than 7,000 illegal immigrants re-

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<sup>3</sup> Anderl Manoschek, p. 12.

ached the country on this same path and, in fact, during those very months. In this book, we will attempt to explain the reasons for this failure, to illuminate the considerations of those responsible for bringing the people to Palestine, and to clarify the process of decision-making involved with that group. We will try to the best of our ability to answer why this group set out on its way despite the uncertainty and dangers awaiting it and what was done to ensure the continuation of this group's journey from Yugoslavia to Palestine, and why the venture failed."<sup>4</sup>

Thus, too, the authors of the Austrian book: "While many illegal transports reached their destination, the attempts to bring the refugee transport described here to Palestine were fated not to succeed. The journey ended at the turning point of 1939/1940 in the small Yugoslav port of Kladovo, the name becoming associated with the group. In September, the refugees were transferred to the Serbian town of Šabac along the Save River. The development of the war, the unpleasant external conditions, misdirected political considerations on the part of the Mossad, and the fateful decision of the secretary-general of the Federation of Yugoslavian Jewish Communities combined to bring it about that nothing again happened to deliver this group in time to safe shores. Only about 200 persons – mostly youth – were able to flee at the last moment before the German invasion of Yugoslavia. They received immigration certificates and reached Palestine by land."<sup>5</sup>

The "whole episode," as the authors of the Hebrew book write, is enveloped in the air of mystery and unclarity. Among many of those close to the deceased were friends who were already in Palestine and were working to rescue them; also, among the lucky ones who made it to Palestine before Yugoslavia was occupied by the Nazis there prevails a feeling of bitterness and resentment. The material that has been published seems to them to be uncompromising and irrational, and the pre-

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<sup>4</sup> Weiner-Ofer, p. 15-16.

<sup>5</sup> Anderl-Manoschek, p. 12-13.

valent feeling among them is that there was a purposeful distortion of the facts....”<sup>6</sup>

The two books, each in its own way and method, attempt to present the facts as they are and to spread this air of mystery and murkiness. The purpose of comparing them is to examine the extent of their success in doing this and possibly even to add a third thought on the affair. The comparison will enable us to explore certain characteristics of Eretz Israel-Zionist writing of history as evidenced in many publications, particularly those of Israeli historians in recent years, in contrast to non-Zionist, non-Israeli, and non-Palestinocentric history-writing.

Even the division of these two books is identical, determined by the chronological order of events:

The exit – expulsion from Vienna.

The journey on the Danube until becoming stuck in Kladovo.

Description of life on the vessels and afterwards in Kladovo, the transfer to Šabac and conditions there.

The fate of the refugees after the German conquest of Yugoslavia.

Chapters 2 and 3 of the Hebrew book were written by Dalia Ofer, and they describe the life of the Kladovo-Šabac illegal immigrants in Yugoslavia until its occupation by the Germans. They also describe attempts by the Mossad and the Immigration Department of the Jewish Agency to bring the group to Palestine, and their failure. These chapters are similar in conception and sources used to the parallel chapters of the Austrian book.

In contrast, the first and last chapters of the Hebrew book differ greatly from the comparable chapters of the Austrian book. These chapters, written by Hannah Weiner, describe the special situation of the Jews of Austria after the *Anschluss* and the background to the Kladovo-Šabac journey, a description of the social composition of the group, and its fate after the Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia. All of this differs from the Austrian book in approach, the basic sources used, and the level of research.

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<sup>6</sup> Weiner-Ofer, p. 16.

This difference, which will be discussed below, may reveal several characteristics of Eretz-Israel history-writing compared to the historiography that is not a pawn of Zionist-pioneering ideology, which focuses on itself.

### The Background of the Kladovo-Šabac Journey

The Hebrew book defines the composition of the group in the following way: “Except for members of the youth movement and Austrian adults (some of them parents and relatives of members of “Hechalutz” and the youth movements), there were among the immigrants members of youth groups and individuals from Germany, Jews from Danzig, and a small number who had fled Czechoslovakia. In Yugoslavia, the immigrants were joined by local Jews and refugees who had escaped Poland and Austria. In the course of time, the group expanded and numbered more than 1,200 persons.”<sup>7</sup>

The Austrian book remarks on the heterogeneity of the group:

“...Men, women, children, and youth – people of all age groups who differed from one another substantially in terms of social background and attitude toward Judaism. Some of them had been active regarding their social background and attitude toward Judaism, some had been Zionist activists a long time prior to the *Anschlussa* whereas for others Palestine was the a destination, a place that could easily be substituted for another. Taking an overall view and analyzing a large number of personal testimonies describing the fate of the refugees from different points of view, the authors have tried to paint a picture of the whole group.”<sup>8</sup>

Adopting an opposite tack, the first chapter of the Hebrew book focuses principally on Hechalutz and the Zionist youth movements. The fate of Austrian Jewry after the *Anschluss*, the

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<sup>7</sup> Weiner-Ofer, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Anderl-Manoschek, p. 14.

events of October, and the pogrom of November 1938 take up fewer than three pages in contrast to the seven pages devoted to Hechalutz, to training for the aliya, the youth immigration school, to educational aims and values, and so forth.

Unlike the Austrian book, which attributes the inclusion of those who were not from the ranks of Hechalutz, which constituted about half the group, to monetary motives, in as much as “the lack of financial means required to organize the ships necessitated to an ever increasing extent accepting people who did not meet the foregoing assumptions (the principle of selection according to physical ability and identification with the Zionist idea – C.S.), but had the ability to raise considerable sums,”<sup>9</sup> the Hebrew book gives less weight to this motive and attributes these people’s inclusion to an act of pity shown by Ehud Avriel. “Avriel even added to the transport 300 Jews from Vienna who did not belong to these frameworks, and it seems that the criterion for taking people on was their difficult personal circumstance and to some extent their ability to participate in financing the expenses of the journey. The transport was organized in a climate of winding up, a last chance to take Jews out of Vienna by means of the Mossad. Avriel saw the distress of the Jews and added to the transport many whose identity we are unable today to determine. Adding hundreds of these Jews greatly changed the character of the transport, and had important implications for relations within the group of illegal immigrants during its long stay in Yugoslavia.”<sup>10</sup>

It seems that the author was sorry for the adulteration of the pure pioneering foundation of the group, which now included many who never in their lives did anything pioneering and did not even intend to do so after arriving in Palestine – these same Jews, “whose identity we are unable to determine,” some of them veteran Zionists who had devoted all of their lives to the Zionist idea and were parents of pioneers in Palestine. Apparently the author even justifies the condescending attitude

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Weiner-Ofer, p. 32.

of that pioneer part of the group that even the managers of the journey displayed toward the bourgeois half, which had financed the expenses of this trek for the former; it was an attitude that was felt along the entire journey.

Anyone who did not come from the ranks of Hechalutz, the Zionist youth movements, and to a certain extent Youth Aliya was looked upon as a foreign body, without identity; and this view is highlighted, too, in the choice of sources on which the Hebrew book relies in this chapter. Almost all are testimonies of Hechalutz people. This contrasts with the Austrian book, which relies on the testimonies of "customers" from the entire ideological spectrum, social background, and ages of the people who composed the Kladovo-Šabac group. Hannah Weiner treats the immigrants from an ideologically predetermined viewpoint, whereas Gabriella Anderl handles them as ill-fated refugees, flesh and blood people.

The two books explain and justify the decision to take the group out of Vienna at any cost, even if the continuation of the sea portion of the journey was not assured, in light of what awaited them in Vienna.

### **Between Aliya and Life on the Run: The Lives of the Kladovo-Šabac Illegal Immigrants in Yugoslavia from January 1940 to April 1941**

In the Hebrew book, this chapter was written by Dalia Ofer in a very similar manner to the parallel chapter in the Austrian book, insofar as content, illustrations, empathetic-human approach and overall conception; both works based the narrative on letters sent by members of the group and on interviews with survivors.

The conception guiding the writing of this chapter is explained in its introduction: "Studies of illegal immigration deal with the bodies and the people who led and organized this

clandestine immigration, and they describe it in the framework of the history of Zionism, the Yishuv, and the Jewish communities of Europe in the 1930s on the eve of the war and after it. The true heroes of the illegal immigration, however, the illegal immigrants themselves, who were ready to board old, decrepit boats and to withstand great dangers, generally remain anonymous. In this book, we wish to devote a chapter to the immigrants, too, and to withdraw the anonymity from one of the groups of immigrants by describing its everyday life... to gain as much as possible a deeper understanding of their feelings and thoughts, how they themselves understood their situation and how they stood up under the difficulties and trials..."<sup>11</sup>

The same method, based on some of the same letters, as well as on others that were not available to the authors of the Hebrew book, was employed by the authors of the Austrian book, who expanded this method not only for this chapter but for their book as a whole, at times leading to an over-fragmentation that makes it difficult to follow the continuity of the narrative.

The two books, each in its own way, bring to close in almost an identical manner and in exemplary fashion a number of subjects from a life's story about which one of the group wrote: "I must remark in all honesty that I felt much better in the concentration camp than here, if one disregards the lack of freedom and the danger of death."<sup>12</sup>

In the context of this paper, whose intention is not to serve as substitute for reading the books themselves, there is no chance or need to discuss details; subject headings only will be cited: the heterogeneous composition of the group, the centralized management, the autocratic behavior of the Hechalutz "commissars," the estrangement of the Hechalutz people from the other, non-organized emigrants, the crowded conditions on-board the ships, the lack of privacy, the constant, aching hunger, a description of everyday life, the organization of life and servi-

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 60.



ces, the suffering of the children, disembarkation to the village and a description of everyday life there, the school, relations with the union of Jewish communities and the heads of the Palestine office in Yugoslavia, individual attempts to obtain immigration certificates and the attendant fears and tensions, visits from outside, the transfer to Šabac, a description of the nerve-racking situation brought on by the interchange of expectations and disappointments (packing and unpacking, packing and unpacking), shipping the Youth Aliya children to Palestine.

A comparative sociological approach is in evidence in the Hebrew book, while the Austrian book demonstrates greater identification with the fate of the individual, his/her family background, and individual characteristics. The two books are similar in their empathetic writing, but still are analytical, and they count among the best historical writing on this subject.

### **To the Land of Choice: The Journey Is Halted**

This chapter, which the Austrian book calls "Behind the Scenes: Rescue Attempts by the Mossad," is problematic, very painful and disturbing not only in this particular matter, but, it seems, in the whole history of the clandestine immigration. The chapter deals with the searing question of responsibility for the failures, in the wake of which this unfortunate and cursed journey of refugees not only did not arrive at its destination but in the end landed in the hands of the Nazi murderers. In the introduction, the authors of the Hebrew book envelop the affair in an air of mystery and unclarity and impart a sense that there was a deliberate blurring of the facts. "In order to put forth the facts as they were, we reconstructed the events day by day and week by week, both before the departure from Vienna... and in the course of the journey during the stay in Yugoslavia."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

And thus the authors fell victim to a widespread error known in logic as the genetic fallacy; that is, the mistake of purporting to see in a continuous description of facts, one after the other, their causal relationship or a kind of substitute for their explanation.

Looking into the reasons for the failure, we must make a distinction between causes over which all parties connected with this affair had no control, such as natural incidents or mishaps (e.g., the freezing over of the Danube) or war events (Italy's entry into the war), and objective constraints, like the White Paper policy, difficulties in obtaining ships, and so forth, that were shared by the rest of the transports that left from Vienna at the same time and on the same route but that reached their destination – between these and failures caused by people deliberately or accidentally and that could have been obviated.

These two books treat both types. We will focus on the question of responsibility in three fateful decisions.

### The Wattan

In the Spring of 1940, Mossad headquarters in Geneva had at its disposal the sum of \$50,000, which had been raised among labor movement activists in the United States in a special campaign to bring the Kladovo-Šabac group to Palestine. Mossad activists deliberated between two alternatives: to negotiate the purchase of a small ship for this group, for whom the money raised was intended, or to conduct negotiations for a large Turkish ship named *Wattan*, which was much more expensive, in order to transport not only the Kladovo immigrants but also immigrants from other groups who were awaiting a signal to set out from the territories of the "Reich." "In the end, it was decided, because of a serious shortage of vessels, to negotiate the purchase of the large, expensive ship in the hope of bringing to Palestine clandestine immigrants from those other groups. Sharing in this decision were all the senior Mossad activists in

Europe: Zvi Yechieli, Moshe Agami, Yosef Bartel, and Ruth Kluger Eliav.”<sup>14</sup>

Finally it became clear that the deal had fallen through and that the money that had been intended for the Kladovo group had gone down the drain. “The cancellation of the *Wattan* deal hurt the Mossad’s credibility among the Yugoslav Federation of Jewish Communities, Labor Zionist activists in New York (who had raised the \$50,000 to purchase the ship), and also among Joint officials, who were forced to continue financing the living expenses of the group.”<sup>15</sup>

In this same spirit, the Austrian book<sup>16</sup> connects the ship-purchase plan to the intention to aid the flight of 2,000 Jews from Prague in exchange for a payment of 25 pounds sterling per head. The deal was never carried out because of arguments between Berthold Storfer and Mossad activists. The two books, each for its own reason, refrain from taking a position on this matter. From a legal viewpoint, a change in the objective of donations without the agreement of the donors and spending money donated for one purpose on another represent a fraud, which would be actionable in any normal country – all the more so if it led, as in this case, indirectly to the death of more than a thousand persons.<sup>17</sup>

## The Darien 2

The Hebrew book tells of the purchase of a ship called *Darien 2* by Zameret and Agami with money that the Mossad received from the Joint for this purpose; however, the heads of the Mossad in Palestine held up its sailing, first with the excuse of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>16</sup> Anderl-Manoschek, p. 108.

<sup>17</sup> In her book, *Sea Road*, Dalia Ofer raises the following question: “Did the Mossad have legal and moral authority not to use the money for purposes other than the direct needs of the Kladovo group?” (p. 84); however, she does not answer it and does not even return to it in the book.

fearing for its safety after Italy had entered the war, even though sailings on the Black Sea and Mediterranean were then continuing normally. In the end, a telegram was sent from Eliahu Golomb “instructing that the Operation Spitzer” should be aborted (code name for the Kladovo immigrants). The decision stined astonishment and opposition among Mossad operatives in Europe, and it was decided that Moshe Agami should return to Palestine to work determinedly to change it... Despite his efforts, he did not succeed in changing the decision by convincing Hagannah and Mossad leaders that it was possible to sail the Mediterranean, that bringing the Kladovo group was possible and safe. The order to stop the Operation Spitzer stood.”<sup>18</sup>

The Austrian book is more accurate as to the sources of the money for purchasing the ship, though this time it, too, does not cite statements in the sources that the price of the ship was \$60,000, that the broker Pendelis owed the Mossad \$12,000 from an advance paid him for the purchase of the *Wattan*, and that the rest of the sum had been obtained (the second time for the same purpose – rescuing the Kladovo-Šabac Jews) from the Joint.

“On 28 May 1940, a meeting took place in Berne between representatives of the Joint in Europe, representatives of the Jewish Agency, and the Mossad. The Mossad agent, Zvi Yechieli, threatened that the Joint would bear full responsibility for all possible consequences if it didn’t transfer \$45,000 for buying the *Darien 2*. He also exerted pressure on the important Zionist organizations in the United States and Europe.”<sup>19</sup>

The two books, the Hebrew one in very great detail based on research worthy of respect for the many revelations of documents in the archives, and the Austrian book, very briefly and without the citation of sources on which it relies, attribute the decision in regard to ceasing immigration attempts on behalf of the Kladovo group and of transferring the ship from the hands

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<sup>18</sup> Weiner-Ofer, p. 77.

<sup>19</sup> Anderl-Manoschek, p. 109.

of the Mossad to the Hagannah (to David Hacoheh and Yehuda Arazi, for 15,000 pounds sterling, or about \$60,000, the price paid for the *Darien 2*, as stated in the Austrian book; in other words, the third payment to enter into Mossad coffers for the same purpose, which it never carried to fruition) to political considerations, those of the institutions of the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine.

David Hacoheh and Yehuda Arazi engaged in secret joint activities with the British. Among others that the two suggested to the British were acts of sabotage and mining, the purpose of which was to hinder transport on the Danube, in particular the flow of oil from Romania to Germany. To carry out this plan, they needed ships, and the ships that served the illegal immigration operations, among them *Darien 2*, were well suited for the purpose. Their use for clandestine immigration constituted camouflage for tricking the Germans and the Balkan governments, who were closely following the movement of illegal immigration vessels.

The decision to transfer the *Darien* to their partners seems incomprehensible and makes one wonder in view of the difficulties Mossad had in purchasing the vessel. It was, though, justified in the position formulated at that time by important leaders of both the Mossad and the Hagannah, for here was an opportunity to advance illegal immigration operations by participating in British intelligence activities in the Balkans... They were of the opinion that through joint action with the various British authorities engaging in intelligence and sabotage in the Balkans, they could establish ties with those of high standing among the British in these countries and through them advance Zionist matters, aliya among them. This basic principle was not, however, relevant to the case of Kladovo, as it did not answer the immediate need of bringing this group to Palestine. On the contrary, it postponed their emigration for an undefined period. Moreover, in the conflict between clandestine immigration operations and partnership activities, this case expressed

the decision to transfer the *Darien* to the needs of the partnership.”<sup>20</sup>

A comment needs to be made: In her book *Sea Road* Dalia Ofer writes: “We have no proof that they tried to implement this plan... David Hacoheh, in his testimonies and in his book, does not refer to a defined plan that was available just before buying the *Darien*.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed the two books do not produce any evidence that the British were partners to these plans. The very claim is absurd, since the British objected to Jewish immigration for political reasons, the objection of the Arabs and various tangential pressures, not because of chilly relations with the Jewish Yishuv, the improvement of which would have caused Britain to remove its objection. Similarly the abortive plan of blocking the Danube meant not only a “postponement” of bringing the Kladovo group to Palestine but also an end to all clandestine immigration by way of the Danube, which they wanted to undermine.

The Hebrew book gives a list of justifications for handing over the *Darien* and, basing itself on authoritative sources, it explains the policy of the Jewish leadership, foremost that of Chaim Weizmann, David Ben-Gurion, and Moshe Shertok, to expand cooperation with the British during the war as much as possible in order to create the conditions for strengthening the military power of the Yishuv and changing Britain’s stance on the Palestine question with the conclusion of the war. The book relies for this conclusion on remarks by Chaim Weizmann in the context of the delivery of the *Darien*: “It is incumbent on Zionist policy... to prefer the long-range goals – that is, the establishment of a framework in which the Jewish masses will find a refuge – over the immediate tasks of bringing this or that group of immigrants to Palestine... When the long-range goals clash with the short-term objectives, it is incumbent upon a responsible leadership not to forget the essence.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Weiner-Ofer, p. 77.

<sup>21</sup> *Sea Road*, p. 93.

<sup>22</sup> Weiner-Ofer, p. 78.

The two books refrain from raising the ethical aspect of giving preference to the speculative “long term” without any anchoring in reality over the “short term” of rescuing 1,200 people rotting away onboard ships and with the danger of death hovering over them.

Dalia Ofer’s doctoral dissertation, on the other hand, read as follows:

“The dilemma stemmed from the clash between the ethical problem, which sees in the saving of human life an absolute, supreme value, and the pragmatic, political problem: The ethical approach sees in illegal immigration a way of saving Jews, and so deflecting all possible criticism of immigration, whereas the pragmatic approach sees in the illegal immigration a tool for advancing Zionist goals on the political plain, or indeed on any other, and therefore sets down utilitarian rationale considerations for realization, or not... The deliberation of the leaders is very internalized because of the the Zionist leadership’s mental and ideological difficulty in understanding the contradiction that may arise between the use of pragmatic means for achieving Zionist aims and rescuing Jews as a supreme moral imperative...”<sup>23</sup>

As to the *Darien* episode, the author even sharpens the dilemma: “At the end of 1940, a year after the war had begun, despite the great worsening of the condition of the Jews and despite the fact that cooperation with the British had led nowhere, they (the Zionist leadership) were still thinking and acting according to the terms, tools, and goals of the winter and spring of 1940. Zionist policy in the matter of the *Darien* exemplifies this situation to the point of absurdity.”<sup>24</sup>

Dalia Ofer’s book, however, does not mention this dilemma nor the contrary opinion of another leader, Berl Katznelson,

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<sup>23</sup> Dalia Ofer, *The Illegal Immigration to Palestine during the Second World War, 1939-1942*, p. 39.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>25</sup> *Sea Road*, p. 95.

that the rescue and immigration of Jews had priority in all cases.<sup>25</sup>

At this point, the book offers another justification for transferring the *Darien* to the Hagannah and Mossad, whose cynicism makes one's hair stand on end: "The Hagannah and Mossad people saw a double utility in transferring the *Darien* to the Hacoheh-Arazi group. If the Mossad did this, it would receive \$60,000 (thus the transfer meant its sale to the British), which would cover the debts it had accumulated from activities of the past winter."<sup>26</sup>

This, it must be noted, would have been the fourth payment made at the expense of saving the Kladovo-Šabac Jews. It seems that their suffering served as not a bad source of income for parties who were mandated to rescue them and for which money was paid to them again and again.

Thus the claim that the chances of bringing this group to Palestine were slight after the spread of the war to the Mediterranean contradicts the very words of the author that Yishuv emissaries Agami and Zameret had conveyed the information that sailings on the Black Sea and the Mediterranean were continuing as usual and that other organizers of illegal immigration had not ceased activity.<sup>27</sup>

It is difficult to contend with Ofer's astounding claim that "it seemed that in the summer of 1940 no real danger loomed for the immigrants in Yugoslavia."<sup>28</sup> One may ask, in rebuttal, Why, then, were emergency appeals conducted among the Jews of America, the Joint, and others, for the purpose of rescuing these immigrants? What reasons were given for the vital nature of these campaigns?

The Hebrew book summarizes this sad, fateful affair: "In agreeing to take the *Darien* from them, the Mossad people were neglecting their immediate commitment to complete the illegal

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<sup>26</sup> Weiner-Ofer, p. 79.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 79.



immigration operation, first and foremost the campaign to bring the Kladovo immigrants to Palestine, which they themselves thought possible. In early September 1940, however, the Mossad returned to the job of bringing out the Kladovo group, but under less favorable conditions. In retrospect, one may say that the removal of the *Darien* from Mossad activists and its transfer to David Hacoheh and Yehuda Arazi prevented the immigration of the Kladovo group in Summer 1940. <sup>29</sup>

Neither book makes it clear what the *Darien's* destinations were between 17 July and early September 1940, when a decision was made to return the *Darien* to its original purpose, to transport the Kladovo people to Palestine. Nor does exact information exist on the why, how, and where of this decision. What happened during these two months, when it was still possible to transport not only the Kladovo group but also those who were waiting their redemption in other places in the Balkans and Turkey – two fateful months before the Danube froze over and blocked the way?

In her doctoral dissertation, Dalia Ofer follows the fate of the *Darien* in this period, and summarizes her findings: “One clear conclusion emerges from investigating the history of the *Darien* in the Summer and Fall of 1940: The ship had no defined, important function in the framework of the cooperation (with the British).”<sup>30</sup>

Dalia Ofer’s *Sea Road* repeats this conclusion and adds: “...but various ways were considered to employ it when concrete action was decided on... It seems that the British were not interested in it, and therefore plans for the ship were postponed or canceled, and it is possible that there were never any defined plans for its use.”<sup>31</sup>

Apparently this affair did not involve any dilemma in which one big idea faced another (and what big idea balanced off the lives of 1,200 people?); or, to paraphrase Weizmann,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>30</sup> See note 23, p. 39.

<sup>31</sup> *Sea Road*, p. 101.

there was here no short-term sacrifice of bringing a group of immigrants to Palestine in favor of the long term, but in favor of nothing at all. David Hacoen, the evil spirit, who obsessively frustrated every attempt to use the *Darien* to save the Jews of Kladovo, could not even remember afterwards what this vessel was used for after he had succeeded in his assignment.<sup>32</sup>

## Darien – Second Edition

Both books give similar reasons for the decision to return the *Darien* to its original purpose.

“The decision to try to bring the Kladovo people to Palestine was made essentially because of the pressures that organizations like the Joint and the Labor Zionist Movement in America exerted on the Jewish Agency and the Mossad. These organizations argued that the Mossad was responsible for the fate of the Kladovo people, and that if they were not brought to Palestine, trust in the prestigious institution would be lost.”<sup>33</sup>

The Austrian book says:

“The most important reason for this sudden change in direction was the loss of prestige that the Mossad was experiencing because the Kladovo transport had run aground.”<sup>34</sup> Eliahu Golomb assigned the job of bringing the Kladovo people to Palestine to Yehuda Braginski, a veteran Mossad official with no involvement in the dealings with the British. He also appealed again to the Emergency Committee, which had raised funds in the United States for clandestine immigration activity, to renew fund raising for the Kladovo refugees.

Braginski arrived in Constantinople on 26 September 1940. By December, there would already be fear of the Danube's freezing over. Of the two remaining months, a precious

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., fn 89.

<sup>33</sup> Weiner-Ofer, p. 90.

<sup>34</sup> Anderl-Mansocheck, p. 111.

month was wasted on tiring negotiations between the Mossad and the Zionist Organization of America, on the one hand, and Spitzer, secretary of the Jewish communities in Yugoslavia, on the other, about to the transfer of payment for coal for the ship. The American representatives wanted an answer as to where that money had gone. In their opinion, all the necessary funds for the *Darien* had been transferred, and they had no more; for his part, Spitzer did not trust the Mossad people.

None of the two books, each for its own reasons, finds it appropriate to condemn this playing with the lives of 1,200 people over such a petty issue.

One cannot but be shocked upon reflecting that behind what the books' authors repeatedly describe as "tragedy" and "fateful failure" lay sheer greed of the Mossad and its embezzlement of funds received for rescuing the Kladovo group.

Moreover, even after the coal money was paid and the ship had set sail for Konstanz in Romania to prepare to take on the passengers just a month ahead of the river freezing, the *Darien* sailed back to Istanbul. On its deck—several hundred immigrants with legal immigration certificates who had paid the full price of the voyage. These immigrants continued from Istanbul to Palestine on the *Hannah*, a Jewish-owned vessel. In her *Sea Road*, Dalia Ofer comes to the conclusion that there were several voyages of this sort.<sup>35</sup> This incident, so incredible one should not hesitate to call it a crime, is not mentioned in the testimonies given by Mossad officials or in their books. There is, no doubt at all that it did happen and prompted Spitzer's complaints against the Mossad is skilling the time.

The Hebrew book offer two explanations for this decision: "Exploiting the opportunity to fill the empty Mossad coffers by collecting payment for a legal voyage" (the fourth or fifth time that the Mossad received payment for the *Darien* at the expense the Kladovo group) and "fear that the ship would be confisca-

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<sup>35</sup> *Sea Road*, pp. 102-103, fn 95.

ted.”<sup>36</sup> This second reason is basically groundless, since with proper coordination the Kladovo people, who were sitting on their suitcases, could arrive in Salonika within a short time and board ship without delay.

The Austrian book, too, presumes that the Mossad’s pressing financial situation and the uncertainty about German involvement in Greece were decisive in this matter.<sup>37</sup> This operation was carried out in late Fall. This added to the urgency of deblocking the Kladovo group. It sealed the fate of these people for with the return of the ship from this moonlighting job, Yugoslavian shipping companies refused to transport the Kladovo group to Salonika on the Danube fearing the ice might damage their ships. Afterwards, Spitzer, who loathed the excuses and lies of the Mossad, which became alarmed following the sinking of two refugee ships, the *Salvador* and the *Patria*, held up sending the Kladovo group by rail. In so doing, or not doing, he became the last link sealing the fate of these people. In this context, one should read the appendices to the Hebrew book, especially the exchange of letters between Šime Spitzer and Dr. Ruth Kluger, which speaks for itself.

The *Darien* returned to the port of Haifa on 19 March; on its deck were 786 other illegal immigrants.

### **Action Taken by the Jewish Agency Youth Aliya on Behalf of the Kladovo Immigrants**

In light of the content of this section of the Hebrew book, the question arises whether the title is not indeed ironic and should read instead, “The lack of action”.

On this subject, which requires expertise on the internal affairs of the Yishuv, the Hebrew book far surpasses the Au-

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<sup>36</sup> Weiner-Ofer, p. 91.

strian volume, which hardly relates to this subject at all. The author of the Hebrew book prefaces this section with a detailed description of British policy, from which the impression is obtained that the British Empire had declared a private and special war against the Kladovo group, thus serving as a kind of justification for the Yishuv's failing to become involved on behalf of the group, which to their misfortune had no chance of success from the outset.

"From the British documents, it appears that the British were stubborn on the matter of the Kladovo group even relative to their tough stance on illegal immigration in general. All requests to grant them immigrant certificates met with intense objection, which justified, at least *ex post facto*, the pessimism of Zionist politicians in regard to their chances of obtaining certificates."<sup>38</sup>

It is difficult to accept this argument, which certainly cannot serve to justify all the failures not directly connected with the British authorities that the authors cites: "We shall make no effort... to mobilize favorable public bodies working on behalf of the refugees for humanitarian or pro-Zionist reasons."<sup>39</sup>

The Jewish Agency, which was the focus of activity for bringing the Kladovo people to Palestine during the time when the Mossad halted its illegal immigration operations, also "did not mobilize for the public struggle in England on behalf of the Kladovo refugees. The difficult living conditions onboard the ship and in the tent camps in Kladovo were seriously under-repated. The suffering of these refugees did not come to the attention of either non-Jewish or Jewish public, and stories in both the British and Jewish press were hardly noticeable."<sup>40</sup>

"The reason for this," the Hebrew book says, "was the assessment that the matter had no great chance of succeeding sin-

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<sup>37</sup> Anderl-Manoschek, p. 176.

<sup>38</sup> Weiner-Ofer, p. 81.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

ce the Kladovo immigrants were living in relative security in Yugoslavia and were being devotedly taken care of by the Federation of Jewish Communities and by the Joint.”<sup>41</sup>

It seems that the determined tendency of the authors of the Hebrew book to justify the Zionist establishment and Yishuv in all cases here reaches a level of cynicism and sarcasm that is difficult to imagine.

Owing to those same justifications and to the duplication in dealing with immigration, “the Jewish Agency’s Immigration Department did not interfere with the Kladovo affair on the level of Jewish Agency policy... and the heads of the Aliya Department... never put the matter on the agenda; because of the Kladovo Jews’ relatively improved situation, Aliya Department officials did not harbor any special fear for their fate and did not think there was need to deviate from the overall policy and give them immigration certificates over the usual quota.”<sup>42</sup> And this was despite Eliahu Dobkin’s article in *Davar* on 10 June 1940, which dealt with refugees and the problems of bringing them to Palestine and which cited in particular the difficult condition of the Danube refugees (in other words, the Kladovo group) and the need to help them.

The dependency on formalistic justifications for the failures of the Zionist establishment in handling the Kladovo immigrants, which runs as a *leitmotif* throughout the Hebrew book, also characterizes Youth Aliya’s handling of the immigration of the youth and children of this group. “The efforts to obtain certificates for the youth of the Kladovo group started back in Winter 1940, but became more intensive when the plan to bring the group to Palestine on the *Darien* was canceled. Thus, in August 1940, after the cancellation of the plan, the Youth Aliya children received immigration certificates. Why, however, were these certificates not received earlier, despite the efforts that were made to this effect? And why was the immigration of the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

Youth Aliya children enabled in practice only in March 1941, several weeks before the German invasion?"<sup>43</sup>

In order to descend to the immorality and obstinacy of the answers to these questions given in the Hebrew book, it must be recalled that the matter involved children and youth who were living onboard ships in concentration camp conditions and whose residency conditions were even worse. Against this, considerations such as sticking fast to criteria that Youth Aliya had laid down for accepting youth into its framework before the outbreak of the war or deliberating the need and justification to transform Youth Aliya into a rescue enterprise become not only utterly irrelevant but also categorically immoral, stupefying, and hard-hearted. It was typical that "among the heads of Youth Aliya opinion differed as to what road to take. The Eretz Israel people were generally more formal and wanted the old criteria left in place."<sup>44</sup> Leading this group was Henrietta Szold, who wrote that they should not forget "the formal guidelines that Youth Aliya set for selecting appropriate children, and that the medical examinations must be conducted very strictly. We must take into consideration not only the individual but also the country, for whose building we are responsible."<sup>45</sup>

The heads of Youth Aliya, out of steadfastness to principles that had been laid down before the war and that were formalistic and legalistic in essence, were ready to favour bringing to Palestine youth from Sweden and other transit countries, youth who did not face any danger and who lived in conditions of plenty that were then almost not to be found in the rest of war-torn Europe, over the children of the Kladovo group.

In August 1940, Youth Aliya transmitted 111 certificates to youth groups among the Kladovo refugees. Only in March and April 1941, however, did four Youth Aliya groups leave Yugoslavia and safely reach Palestine. The Hebrew book gives the rea-

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 86

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

son for the delay of more than half a year: "bureaucratic obstacles in the countries on the passage to Palestine."<sup>46</sup> The Austrian book speaks of a difference of only a month between receiving word of the certificates and the exit from Yugoslavia despite those bureaucratic difficulties, which were possible to overcome.<sup>47</sup>

Even before their arrival in Palestine, Yugoslavia was occupied by the Germans. If those whose responsibility it was to bring children and youth to Palestine had continued to dither, as was their wont up to then, their share in the guilt of the death of children would rightly have sat heavily on their consciences, just as the death of a thousand Kladovo Jews weighed on the consciences of the Mossad and leaders of the Yishuv in Palestine.

Henrietta Szold, acting on behalf of Youth Aliya, also refused another group of 120 children smuggled out of Germany to Yugoslavia by Recha Freier. At the last moment, 90 of this group received immigration certificates, though not through the Youth Aliya. The remaining 30 children were left behind, enduring great suffering, even though Youth Aliya had certificates in hand.<sup>48</sup>

The Austrian book relates in different places the story of individual escape plans, but in the context of the transport. Some of these attempts were not successful, such as requests to emigrate to America via Lisbon, the unsolved problem being that of obtaining a connection from Belgrade to Lisbon (through Athens or Rome), or when the movement of ships between Lisbon and New York were stopped on the alternative route from Serbia to Vladivostok to San Francisco.<sup>49</sup> An attempt was also made by a group of people to abandon the Kladovo transport and to join one organized by Berthold Storfer of Vienna.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>47</sup> Anderl-Manoschek, p. 183.

<sup>48</sup> Chaim Schatzker, "Youth Aliya and Its Role in Saving Children Refugees of the Holocaust, in Absorbing Them, and in Rehabilitating Them," in *The Surviving Remnant, 1944-1948*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 5751 (1991), p. 334.

<sup>49</sup> Anderl-Manoschek, pp. 163-168.



A number of people who had certificates obtained a transit permit via Greece and managed to save themselves this way. The exact number is not clear. According to sources, it involved 30-50 people.<sup>50</sup> These attempts find no mention in the Hebrew book, perhaps because they were not made in the framework of Hechalutz and the Mossad, and their destination was not Palestine.

A small number of the Kladovo group succeeded in fleeing even after the German invasion of Yugoslavia. The story of Hertha Eisler-Reich and her husband Romek Reich, who escaped via Italy, is described in detail in the Austrian book; it is a story that has a human uniqueness of its own in the array of stories of the fate of people during the Holocaust. The Hebrew book gives it a few words only. The fascinating story of Frieda Fanny Weiner (Rosenzweig), who escaped via Bulgaria and made it to Palestine after four years, is not mentioned in the Hebrew book. The Austrian book, which surpasses the Hebrew volume throughout in human interest in the fate of the individual, contains only a survey of the fate of the rest of those left alive.

### **Fate of the Kladovo-Šabac People After the German Attack on Yugoslavia**

This sad chapter can be summed up in the few sentences with which the Hebrew book begins the chapter, "The Occupation Regime in Serbia and the Fate of Its Jews."

"With the conquest of Yugoslavia by the Nazis in April 1941, the country was split. In Croatia, a satellite state was set up, headed by Ustashe. Macedonia was given to Bulgaria, and the area of Vojvodina was transferred to Hungary. Serbia remained under German occupation. At that time, there were some 20,000 Jews there, including refugees who had sought shelter and the Kladovo-Šabac group. After the occupation, the Nazis

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 184-185.

began to persecute the Jews of Serbia and, within a year, by spring 1942, had murdered all of them. The mass murder of the Jews of Serbia started in Fall 1941 with the killing of Jewish men by firing squads in the context of military actions to wipe out the Partisans fighting against the German occupation and, especially, in the context of the murder of hostages. This murder was carried out at a time when the Einsatzgruppen (the execution divisions) were undertaking, with the help of the German army, mass murders in the Soviet Union. The Jewish women in Serbia were murdered in the period between March and May 1942, in a gas van brought from Germany for carrying out the Final Solution. The fate of the Kladovo-Šabac people was part of this story of blood.”<sup>51</sup>

In the description of this period, the two books are also almost identical in structure and in the secondary division of sections:

The occupation regime in Serbia and the fate of its Jews.  
The first anti-Jewish measures.

The armed uprising in Serbia – beginning of the Partisans’ uprising and retaliation against the Jews.

The first German assault, the Bloody March in Šabac – the battle for Šabac, the Final Solution in Serbia.

Murder of Jewish and Gypsy hostages, murder of the Jewish men – the order by General Bohme to kill the Jews.

The murder of women and children in the Sajmište concentration camp.

## Epilogue

As stated in the beginning, this article is not intended to serve as a substitute for reading at least one of the two books, and it is beyond its scope to survey the content of these summa-

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<sup>51</sup> Weiner-Ofer, pp. 93-94.

ry topics; rather, its intention is to discuss the differences in approach and the difference in emphasis between the two works. Both are based on extensive archival documentation in addition to relying on basic studies on the subject by Menachem Shelah and Christopher Browning. The two books highlight the fact that the Jews of Serbia were annihilated in the first stage of the Final Solution.

Two tendencies are prominent in the more detailed Austrian book, which is also more analytical than the Hebrew book:

It gives prominence to the role played by Austria in the German armies in Serbia, and to the place of Austrian war criminals in murdering Jews in general and the Jews of Kladovo-Šabac – who mainly came from Austria – in particular.

The author of this chapter in the Austrian book, who even wrote a special book devoted to the subject,<sup>52</sup> highlights the role of the Wehrmacht in initiating, planning, and carrying out the Final Solution in Serbia even before it was adopted as a general policy under SS responsibility.

The book details to a greater extent the initial means taken against the Jews of Serbia, in particular the economic aspect. The military aspects, both of the Germans and the Serbian resistance, are more detailed and professional than in the Hebrew book. A kind of *leitmotif* running through the book is showing that the killing of the Jewish population, in particular the men of the Kladovo group, had and could have had no connection with their aiding the Partisans, since these Jews were kept isolated without any possibility of contact with the Šabac population, let alone the Partisans. The source of this false accusation lies in the policy of the Wehrmacht to excuse its part in war crimes and the murder of Jews as being militarily justified, as it were.

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<sup>52</sup> Walter Manoschek, "Serbien ist judenfrei," *Militarische Besatzungspolitik und Judenvernichtung in Serbien, 1941-42*, R. Oldenbourg Verlag, Munich, 1993.