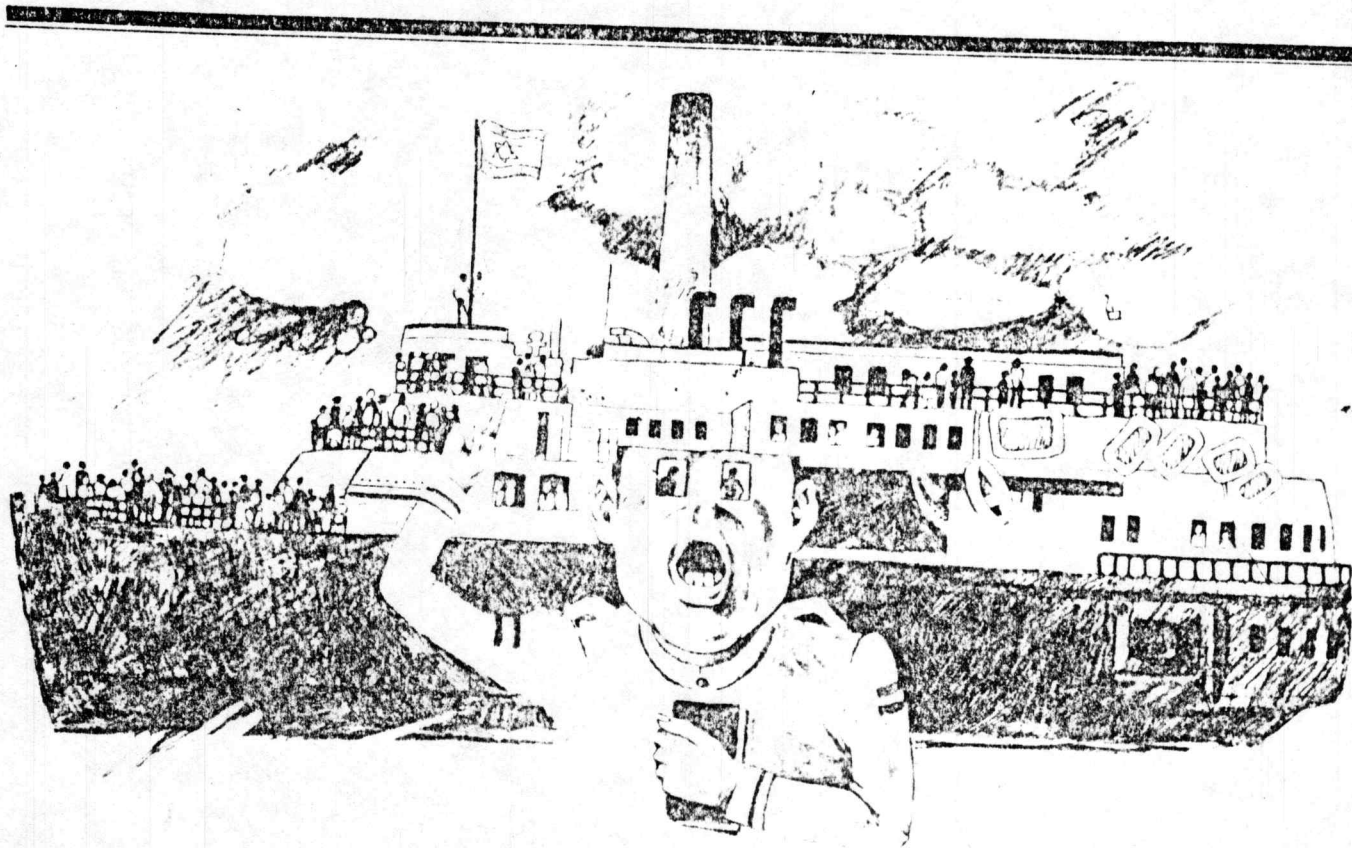


1945

A Story by Aharon Appelfeld



Our captain is a Swede. A tall man with sky-blue northern eyes, which somehow call to mind watery horizons growing pale with the cold. At dusk he leaves his cabin to speak. He speaks in German, even though it isn't all intelligible, and we'll probably never fathom what he really means. One thing is clear: he reads the Bible. Day in, day out, like a pedantic clock, he stands over us on the deck and reads. The blue metal echoes his voice, as it does his eyes. Sometimes reading is not enough for him; he expounds. His explanations are no different from his readings—rhythmical, like blows to a hard anvil.

What does he want? people ask, not without suspicion. The years in the camps and on the move have made us a suspicious lot. For us, vain words are as hard to take as flattery. All the more so words from the holy books. All the more so from a stranger to whose mercy we are consigned.

What does he want? He must want something. Perhaps it isn't so much a matter of wanting as of having decided. He is trying to put us to sleep, and

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when we wake up we will no longer be here. But as long as he is in charge, setting the course of the ship—a ramshackle vessel whose engines breathe heavily—so long as he is at the helm, we have no choice but to sit and contemplate him: his height, his brazen, fanatical eyes, his drumming voice.

Sometimes he nods his head over the book, looking then like nothing so much as a Protestant cleric, a wicked missionary determined to convert us. But such intent, if it is really there, does not frighten us. We long ago lost all belief. The fear which remains to us is a simple fear. What have we not done in order to live? And, in fact, it is our selfish striving that has kept us alive.

Meanwhile, the ship sets sail. The hot sea roasts us from dawn to dusk. There are plenty of sardines. Were it not for the strict rationing of water, we could stretch out on the deck and breathe the parched saltiness of the sea. On deck you will still find fixtures which bear witness to other days, soft, turn-of-the-century days. But the ship has seen many changes since then, deteriorating from a cruise liner to a freighter. On the doors, some ornate nickel handles remain, but the heavy cargoes have scattered their

corrosion everywhere. The planks are full of holes, the sheet metal is dented and ropes like sick snakes intertwine across the deck.

We are sailing for Palestine. Who has not heard of Palestine? The Swedish captain calls Palestine the Holy Land—but these words, a weak echo left over from our childhood, make us recoil. When a man starts to talk about holiness, suspect him tenfold.

The aged rabbi, who in his day was involved in our fate, no longer utters a sound. He smokes one cigarette after another and is unmoved by the captain's fervor. With the passage of the years, his face has taken on our features. His nephews feed him sardines and cigarettes. His advice is no longer sought. He is asked for authorizations, he serves as a witness and his signature is obtained for all kinds of documents which are probably of no use to anyone. The reason is simple: man, in the last analysis, is not free. Who knows what laws are in force in Palestine? Who knows what talebearers have wound up there? An alibi can't hurt. At one time he would refuse to sign anything until he understood its import. He himself would do the reading. Now he no longer insists on it. He signs every document his nephews bring him. If that's what people want, why deny them?

And so the ship is carried over the waves. To be sure, progress is very slow. From time to time, islands and fog banks, like meaningless signposts, appear; and from sunup to sundown, the captain, his rhythmic reading. Tireless, one must admit. And yet, what does he want? We have already received our punishment in this world. And if it is a matter of punishment in the world to come, it seems no one is afraid of that. Only one among us gives it any thought. A small sin weighs upon him, and because of it he runs about from place to place. He left his aged father behind in an open field. But who of us has not done such things? No, it must be some other bit of unsavory past which hounds him. Maybe he hit someone. Or ratted on someone. Who of us has not done such things? All the same, one can't deny that the man is driving us crazy. We know by now that madness too is contagious.

But in the meantime we eat, drink and smoke whatever cigarettes are to be had. Strange, this eating. Disgustingly selfish. Still, no one refrains from it. The children run around on deck, playing and quarreling, and only when the captain goes up to his corner to sermonize do they keep quiet. They are afraid of him. So are we. The droning is as frightful as a bad dream. Even the experienced smugglers—tough, fearless men—grimace at the sight of the captain mounting his post. What does he want? What have we done? Morality he preaches to us. Let him preach to the crew. They're corrupt enough.

The crew—a motley of Italians, a Turk and two Jew-hating Croats. In their cabin there is plenty of

food and cigarettes, and they lure our prettiest girls there. At one time, the rabbi would reprove the girls. Once on the ship, he stopped. Rabbi, Rabbi, why don't you give them a talking-to? the traders and smugglers say. The rabbi says nothing. In the camps and the forests, we kept our humanity despite it all, and now this too has been peeled off us.

"What is there to say?" the rabbi murmurs.

"But it's your duty to say something, isn't it? To warn them at least?"

The rabbi takes in the abuse and shuts his eyes.

But there is a father here who cannot stand this dereliction. He beats his daughter mercilessly, in front of everyone. The daughter screams and runs away; in the end she is caught by her father's strong hands. "No daughter of mine is going to play whore!" he beats into her as if into an empty sack, and when he is completely possessed by his rage, people get up and free the girl from his clutches. She covers her face with her disheveled hair and bawls.

"What do you want from her?" the smugglers chide him. "You're worried about her future? Life isn't forever. Let her enjoy it a little."

Already two weeks at sea. The appearance of the sea has changed. It is dark green now, and seething. The cigarettes are running out, and hands are trembling for want of the poison. The engines are tired; they breathe heavily. The unruly crew is not particularly worried. They gaze at us with gratuitous scorn.

But the captain is still at it: The Holy People is returning to the Holy Land. Is it not a sign from on high? The divine promise has come out of concealment! Now it can be seen with the naked eye!

"What does he want?" the smugglers and traders mutter. "What business is it of his?"

If only we could plug up our ears. But whatever we do, there is the voice of the captain, sharp and hammering. As though it were attached to a pounding drum. Lately, he has taken to getting up and praying, and this prayer of his is as painful to us as thorns.

Since there are no cigarettes, we steal from one another. This stealing is the most disgusting thing of all.

"Aren't you ashamed?"

"I didn't meant to—it's my hands that are guilty."

"Don't pretend."

"I swear to you," the man says, drawing a knife-blade across his fingertips. Blood flows. "Now do you believe me?"

Who induced us to come aboard this ship, who? Who made us all those grand promises? The rabbi, at least, cannot be accused of empty promises. He came aboard confidently like the rest of us. Now it becomes clear that those who made the promises are not here. We are left to our own devices as we have never been before, even in the camps. The Jew is an innocent creature. Not innocent, foolish. Not foolish, repulsive. Thus do the traders brood among them-

serves, gathered inside the fatty folds of their faces, and practicality spins epigrams from their throats. No disaster comes uninvited. But what good are words? They're as contemptible as the sardine cans that roll around on the deck. A bad odor rises from every corner.

And the more the days pass, the more determined the captain gets. At first there was a certain softness to his beat. Now he chastises us as if we were his own undisciplined crew. Don't you understand? Don't you see? What more must I do? his voice thunders. It shows in his face: he's angry. He has shut himself up in the engine room and comes out only at certain times to give his speeches. Rumor has it he has taken to pounding out of anger.

Only a few months ago we were still human beings. Beaten, to be sure, persecuted, but not without hope. No one stood over us and harangued us. We weren't heroes, but neither were we vermin. Doesn't the captain see us as we are? Why does he mock us, calling us God's People, the Chosen People? Who needs such empty rhetoric? We, at least, have no need for it. Let him leave us alone with our little hurt.

The agitation on deck is growing. The anger has found a channel and is now rushing toward its target—the Swede. The captain has grown very thin in the last week, his military garb hangs on him and his blue gaze burns with some evil blue fire. Mercenary or priest, he is not a man of whom one could simply ask to be left alone. We have no need for beliefs. Give us cigarettes. Without cigarettes, we'll go mad.

The captain doesn't hear. Every evening he gets up and reads. Twice a day these last few days. Now there can be no doubt that faith is coursing through him, and he is chastising us with the power of this faith. But our reaction is nothing but revulsion. And already the first signs of rebellion have appeared. The Swede is not lacking in sensitivity; he has noticed it. That's why he thunders.

"You don't have to tell us what prayer is," the traders and smugglers shout at him. "We know very well. When it comes to knowledge, the rabbi knows Scripture by heart!"

"Then why don't you believe?" The captain flashes his blue glare.

A heavy discussion that goes on for hours, in broken but intelligible German. The days here have noticeably altered the faces of the traders and smugglers a little. Something else is darkening in them, something they will sooner die than give up. They are ready to take the risk. Let the captain sail his ship and spare us his beliefs and opinions. We didn't ask for this voyage. But the Swede doesn't let up. People of God, he begs, all depends on you.

"Take us to hell if you like, we won't trade real results for any mere consolation," the traders shout.

While the verbal struggle is still under way, the captain disappears. A certain quiet descends on the

deck, a still, airless quiet like the very essence of emptiness. People have wrapped themselves in tattered blankets; and the father—the one whose girl was seduced by the crew—is whining in a thin voice. His daughter is sitting next to him wrapped in a blanket, her scanty hair in disarray, like a battered bird. The man sits whining to himself in a monotone: All these years I've watched over her, and now what will become of her?

"It's no catastrophe," the others say. "We've seen greater catastrophes."

"This is the worst catastrophe of all," the man says, speaking to himself.

"So what do you want?"

"Nothing."

"Then stop whining."

Strange. The man has stopped whining. The cold silence returns, hiding the people in the ragged blankets.

"Why provoke the captain?" one of the traders concludes practically.

"A man is not an insect," a smuggler feels himself called upon to reply.

"True it's not easy to admit," the man says quietly, "but he is an insect all the same."

And in between these distressingly vague, horribly practical words, and the whines, the crew has taken over the ship. At the helm stands the engineer. In the evening he comes out and declares abruptly, "The captain has taken leave of his senses. I have appointed myself captain. The ship will continue on to Palestine as planned."

A certain sense of relief comes over us, as after a disaster. Even though we know the crew is corrupt, the engineer a wild man, no one feels the least bit sad about the Swedish captain's madness. This would seem to be the very miracle we were waiting for. Now no one will preach to us anymore.

The thin silence spreads out over the deck now, enveloping the women and children. The traders and smugglers have, in a curious way, been brought back to life. Once again they are trading coins, joking and playing cards—and in between the jokes: What do you say about the Swede?

"I can't stand rhetoric."

"All right, but what's going to happen now?"

"I'm not worried."

Now the engineer comes out and announces simply: "Everybody up at six. Breakfast at seven. Two cigarettes apiece. No admittance to the lounge." The officers carouse in the lounge late into the night. There's no lack of cigarettes there, or of alcohol. That being the case, there's no lack on deck either. The conduit from lounge to deck is not about to be closed.

But as the distance grows shorter, dark suspicion intrudes deeper and deeper. A certain gaunt bitterness cuts into the flesh of the night. The anonymous

dead are cast overboard without benefit of Kaddish, and the echo of their plunge, clearly heard, is secreted away inside us like a fresh disaster.

"I prefer it this way," a smuggler says.

"What do you mean?"

"I prefer to get to Palestine without any religious expectations."

"In other words, you prefer the engineer to the Swedish captain."

"Yes, to put it plainly."

"You'll have to admit he's corrupt."

"Why do you say corrupt? He looks out for himself."

"If that's the case, then we're the means he's using to look out for himself."

"Suppose we are. I don't believe in the perfection of the world."

And at night, between silences, the terrible wail of the captain comes up, a thin suppressed wail. Had we not known his voice it would probably not have reached us. No one dares go near the cell where he

is locked up. And the more tightly sealed the night's silence, the thinner and purer his voice becomes, no longer to the ears but to the bare temples. Strange. Now, from a distance, with him gone, there is a tie between him and us. But daylight returns, silencing his voice altogether.

Sun and salt pound us to the point of drying up. The crew lords it over us, now and then dropping anti-Semitic remarks. But we are practical minded. Practicality clings to us like our very skin. The traders and smugglers are our teachers. Anger is indecent. Pride accomplishes nothing. Beliefs are a deception. It is this they teach us, nothing else. Or rather, their faces teach us this. Words, as we've learned are useless.

And so we reach Palestine. We arrive in the month of Av, with the awful feeling that we've made it by accident.

translated from the Hebrew
by Michael Swirsky

An Israeli Abroad

*I get up in the morning
And go out into the orchard to gather apples.
Birdless skies and wet grass*

Ask me:

Do you have the right to exist?

*I bring my wife a basket
Of apples washed in dew.*

She thanks me:

The apples are baking brown.

I peer into the steaming stove,

My face grows red.

Do we have the right to exist?

I think of the harp

That played at midnight

When the north wind stirred:

Even the sparrow has found a home . . .

I think of the chariot man,

His eyes full of flashing amber

And myriad beasts:

In thy blood live . . .

*When my son comes home,
I tell him to learn these verses
By heart.*

At night he'll dream

Of a bird in its blood,

Of a chariot harnessed to four-faced

Lightning.

I've no doubt that one day

And perhaps one day soon,

A starling or a northern star

Will ask him:

Little boy, do you?

Oxford, 1974

—T. Carmi (translated from the Hebrew by
Tudor Parfitt)

T. Carmi is an outstanding contemporary Israeli poet and editor of the forthcoming monumental Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse.