

# 29 Jews Seized Tunneling Out Of Cyprus Camp

## Almost Outwit Guards by Daring; British Sentence Culprits to Island Jail

By Ruth Gruber

*By Wireless to the Herald Tribune*

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FAMAGUSTA, Cyprus, Aug. 7.

—Having failed to escape from Cyprus detention camps after digging a tunnel, cutting barbed wire and reaching fishing boats, twenty-nine Jewish refugees were tried in Cyprus this week and given prison sentences ranging from four to nine months. They will serve their terms in Central Prison, Nicosia.

Five were caught in a little boat attempting to reach the vessel Atid, which was on its way from Larnaca to Haifa. Four men, one of them a representative of the American Joint Distribution Committee, were allowed to go free because evidence against them was insufficient. One man was fined £30 and released because he was able to prove he was covering a story as a journalist and had no intention of going to Palestine.

One man managed to escape on the way from the court to prison and, according to the British, is still at large.

The tunnel, a British officer told me, was a masterpiece. Refugees began it inside the tent under the very nose of British guards sitting in the watch towers, dug it four yards underground and deep enough so a man could stand up and walk. It ran from inside the camp beneath the two walls, from the barbed wire to the field outside the camp. Here, while the British played giant searchlights over the camp, the people managed to escape.

The real problem, however, was how to escape from the island, which to the Jews has become Devil's Island, where every ship is watched by the British.

### Typical English Court

I visited the District Court yesterday where Meer Teper, twenty-four, formerly of Warsaw, Poland, who had been caught after escaping from Camp 55, the most notorious camp in Caracolos, was sentenced to four months imprisonment.

The courtroom was a typical English court, with odd-shaped brown wooden witness box directly in front of the judge's bench. The judge sat under a picture of King George in full uniform and medals. The defendant pleaded guilty, saying he had been in the camp nine months and wanted to get to Palestine.

All the arrested men were charged with the same offense: They were illegal immigrants, they were detained under British detention law, they had escaped from lawful custody. Mr. A. Epenetos, assistant registrar from the district court of Famagusta, permitted me to read the police record.

The written British charge against each of the five defendants tried and convicted Wednesday, read: "The accused on or about the 18th July, 1948, at Caracolos Camp, near Famagusta, being illegal immigrants detained under the provisions of the detention law and being kept in lawful custody, did escape from such lawful custody." Three witnesses, one a Larnana policeman, signed the criminal summons.

In a statement made to the police, Ethiel Singer, twenty-three, formerly of Poland, wrote, "I am in Cyprus for the last eighteen months, and my wife and little child are in Palestine, and I don't want to continue staying here." Benek Weissman, twenty, also formerly of Poland, wrote, "it is two years now I am in Cyprus and I am very nervous, sick. I want to go to Palestine."

One defendant, Moshe Shapsse, seventeen, from Poland, wrote with pride, "I did not run away. I got out."

Some of the defendants pleaded guilty, some not guilty, but, except for four, the court found them all guilty of having broken the British law. The judge said it was not for him to go into the legality of the detention law; that was a law issued by the government. It was his duty to sentence these people under that law, he stated.

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Yesterday and today, Dr. Joseph Schwartz, European chairman of the American Joint Distribution Committee, visited camps Xylotyobou and Caralos. He was accompanied by his wife; Melvin Goldstein, assistant secretary of the A. J. D. C. for Europe, and Pesach Litwak, assistant director of the A. I. D. C. for Israel, Morris Laub, of the Bronx, New York, A. J. D. C. director for Cyprus, and his assistant, Joshua Leibner, formerly of New York City conducted the party through the camp.

They were shown refugees quarters in tents and Nissen huts, where three or four families still live together and the only privacy is furnished by curtain rags sewn together. In sweltering heat they saw kitchens where the refugees cook food which the British Army gives them, plus supplements provided by the A. J. D. C. They saw the shocking conditions under which 250 infants live—some in bathtubs, some on the floor—because the fathers are not permitted to go to Palestine and the mothers refuse to break up the families .

### 13,000 in Camps

The camp committee told Dr. Schwartz the remaining 13,000 refugees have three requests: first,

want more Hebrew classes and Hebrew teachers. About 1,500 are now studying Hebrew. Third, they want to start a craft program again, with classes in carpentry, locksmith work, etc., so that when they enter Israel they will have a trade.

Dr. Schwartz told them no one knew when the British would permit resumption of such a program. Every one hoped it would be soon, but no one knew. For the other two requests he agreed to increase the A. J. D. C. budget \$10,000 to \$15,000. In January the A. J. D. C. budget for Cyprus was \$1,000 a month; it has fallen considerably since the population decreased from 30,000 to 13,000.

The problem is to obtain a staff from Palestine. The British Consul General in Haifa refused to stamp a Cypriot visa in the blue-and-white passport of the Israeli government, saying he could not put a visa in a passport from a country he does not recognize.

The Consul General, who is accredited only to the municipality of Haifa and not to the Israeli government, told the A. J. D. C. he would stamp Cyprus visas in the old Palestinian passport issued by the former mandate government, and if that passport had expired he would consider renewing it for these purposes.

### Refugees Give Concert

In the afternoon, the refugees give a concert in honor of Dr. Schwartz, playing mostly modern Hebrew songs. An exhibition of painting and sculpture in Cypriot stone was opened; most of the art work dealt with life inside the prison camps. The refugees were finding the way back to health by turning the terrible experiences of Cyprus into art forms.

When we returned from the camp a British officer told me he was afraid the camp might be kept open for a long time. "We are not happy here," he said. "It's no fun pushing women and children around."

This morning Dr. Schwartz said, "The spirit of the people in the Cyprus prison camps is very bad. If they are detained much longer the problem of morale will be very difficult. It will be hard to keep the splendid discipline that has characterized the group. The idea of keeping infants, born at the rate of 100 a month, behind barbed wire and in prison camps is very difficult to contemplate. Provision will have to be made for winter clothing if the people stay, because Cyprus is wet and freezing cold in winter."

"An important problem in legal aid may develop," he continued. "There is no doubt that if the peo-

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ple are convinced their stay is indefinite attempts at escape will increase, and violations of all kinds of military regulations will inevitably increase. A. J. D. C. may have to assume the responsibility of providing the people with lawyers.

"On the whole, the people are very perplexed. All of them said to me 'Who would have thought on May 15 that on Aug. 7 we would still be here.' "

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