



Schusterman's Coffin

Located right on the beach, the British Mandate's Atlit Detention Camp was intended to stop illegal Jewish immigrants washing up on the shores of their homeland. One young arrival, however, was determined to escape // [Tamar Hayardeni](#)

Atlit Detention Camp

National museum of illegal immigration and the struggle for independence, including a full-size model of the original British Mandate camp

Exit Route 2 at Atlit Junction for Route 7110

Entrance fee. Open Sun. –Thurs., 9 am–5 pm, Fri., 9 am–1 pm
Guided tours by appointment only:
(04) 984-1980



A

vraham Schusterman's odyssey began somewhere in the virtually unpronounceable Polish town of Łachwa. In the summer of 1942, a year after Łachwa had been conquered by the Germans

and its Jews stuffed into the most overcrowded ghetto in the world, the Nazis decided to liquidate them. The Jews did not go quietly. Though their revolt was quickly crushed, the ensuing confusion allowed many to escape into the nearby forests.

One such survivor was eleven-year-old Schusterman, who miraculously found his father, Gershon, hiding in the woods as well. The boy's two elder siblings, Hasya and Itzik, had already left for Mandate Palestine in 1935. His mother and other relatives perished in the burning ghetto.

Father and son hid for three long years, until the war's end. By then, Gershon had fallen prey to cancer, and his health steadily deteriorated. After the war, the two wandered through Europe, until in the winter of 1947 they joined a group of illegal immigrants headed for Palestine aboard the *Haim Arlosoroff*. Finally, they were headed home – but the British intercepted the boat and sent all its passengers to a detention camp in Cyprus.

With hundreds of fellow refugees packed into the camp's many corrugated iron huts, Gershon grew so ill that he became eligible for immediate transfer to Mandate

Palestine, to a parallel facility on the beach at Atlit, south of Haifa. But Schusterman wouldn't leave without a promise that Avraham would soon join him.

Gershon arrived at Atlit just before Pesach but died at the end of the festival, having barely set foot on holy ground. He was fifty-one.

Humanitarian Gesture

On April 13, 1947, the *Davar* daily reported Schusterman's death. "The deceased's family is requested to apply immediately to the Jewish Agency immigration office in Haifa," continued the brief announcement. A few days later, the paper ran a column entitled "Why?" in which an incensed anonymous writer wondered how the immigrant Schusterman had been allowed to die alone.

Hasya and Itzik dashed off a letter to the Jewish Agency's Cyprus office:

You will, of course, remember our father, Mr. Gershon Schusterman, who was moved up on the waiting list for entry [into Palestine] as a result of his poor health. He arrived in Atlit the day before Pesach and, to our great regret, died a few days later [...]. We weren't



fated to be informed of our late father's illness. He died alone and without [his] offspring in Atlit, and we heard of his passing only thanks to the newspapers. We would be extremely grateful if you could investigate this case and allow our younger brother, Avraham Schusterman, to come to Palestine.

Less than a month later, despite the bureaucracy involved, young Schusterman set sail for the land of Israel. His path to freedom was still blocked, however, since new arrivals were detained in Atlit for months.

By now, Schusterman had had enough. Determined to escape confinement, he spent a week casing the camp and its hundreds of prisoners. He discovered that once a week, a limited number were released, transferred by ambulance to Haifa. Their belongings were loaded onto a truck for delivery by five Jewish detainees. Schusterman volunteered for the task, hoping to "disappear" inside someone's valise.

The idea was simple but risky. The British carefully supervised



Young Holocaust refugees disembark from the train at Atlit as British policemen keep a strict watch, July 1945

Photo: Zoltan Kluger, Israel Government Press Office

the loading of the truck, checking suitcases at random. If caught, Schusterman would be shot, but he'd made up his mind. He let a new seventeen-year-old acquaintance in on his secret. The young man thought he was crazy – but decided to join him.

Schusterman befriended a Jewish sergeant who helped oversee the luggage loading. Upon hearing the prisoner's sob story – from the horrors of the burning ghetto in Łachwa to his father's miserable death in Atlit – the officer agreed to ignore anything unusual.

On the appointed day, Schusterman and his co-conspirator joined the baggage detail and – on cue – slipped inside a medium-size crate that

Avraham Schusterman feared he'd survived the terrors of Europe only to dig his own grave

was promptly loaded onto the truck, then buried under a pile of suitcases. Curled up inside, the two suddenly realized they'd neglected one essential detail – ventilation. Twenty minutes later, the stowaways were suffocating and throwing up over each other. Panic-stricken, Schusterman feared he'd survived the terrors of Europe only to dig his own grave.

Avraham's friend urged him to make one last effort. Together, despite the mountain of luggage weighing them down, they managed to open the lid of the crate a hairsbreadth. The whiff



By the By

- ▶ The Łachwa ghetto, today in Belarus, was among the first to rebel against the Nazis. Some four hundred Jews were killed in the revolt. Though Nazi casualties were negligible, the ghetto wall was breached, and six hundred Jews escaped (Avraham Schusterman included). By war's end, only about ninety were still alive.
- ▶ After the British issued the White Paper of 1939, reducing Jewish immigration to Palestine to a trickle, the military facility in Atlit was converted into a detention camp for illegal immigrants. Men and women were allowed contact only during the day. Immigration certificates were extremely limited, so when the camp overflowed, detainees were transferred to similar quarters in Cyprus. After Israel gained independence, the facility held captive Egyptian soldiers. In the 1950s, it became a transit camp for refugees from North Africa, and after the Six-Day War, it housed POWs from Egypt and Syria. In 1986, it was declared a national heritage site.
- ▶ Schusterman and other survivors of the Łachwa ghetto set up the Nimrod Foundation in memory of his eldest son, Nimrod, who was killed in the 1982 Lebanon War. Dedicated to perpetuating the story of Jewish heroism in the Holocaust, the foundation is housed in the Yitzhak Ben Zvi Middle School in Kfar Saba and includes a fine library.

of fresh air revived them, but some of the valises toppled over, bringing the truck to a halt.

Hagana!

Outside, there was a tumult of voices and shouts. Someone rushed to the rear of the truck, cast aside the remaining suitcases, and threw open the crate's lid. Schusterman and his friend tried to run for it, but their legs were too cramped. *This is the end*, Avraham thought to himself. But instead of an angry British soldier, he beheld a smiling face beneath a *kova tembel*, a cap popular among Jewish settlers.

"Hi, guys," the young man greeted them. "Are you the ones who ran away from Atlit? Don't worry, you're in good hands. Welcome to the land of Israel!" It turned out that the escapees' good friends from Atlit had alerted the Jewish Agency to their

plan. The agency in turn notified the Hagana (one of several underground Zionist militias), which then stopped the truck, neutralizing its British staff and saving the two youths.

An emotional Avraham was reunited with his brother and sister, who lived in nearby Kiryat Haim. He joined a Youth Aliya group in Kibbutz Tel Yosef, in the Jezreel Valley, and later the Palmah (the Hagana's strike force). Schusterman fought in the Jerusalem corridor during Israel's War of Independence, continuing his military career as a lieutenant colonel in the tank corps. In his subsequent civilian life, he ran the absorption desk for Russian and Ethiopian immigrants at Ben-Gurion Airport.

Avraham Schusterman died in 1995, surrounded by his children and grandchildren. In the

Handy Info



Where to Eat

Abrada

Paz Gas Station
99 Derekh Ha-yam Street
Atlit
Kosher, meat, (04) 954-4460

Nili

43 Ha-meyasdim Street
Zikhron Ya'akov
Mehadrin kosher, fish
(04) 629-2899



Don't Miss

Naval and Illegal Immigration Museum

204 Allenby Street, Haifa
Open Sun.–Thurs., 10 am–4 pm
Entrance fee, (04) 853-6249

Glass Factory Museum

Kibbutz Nahsholim
Open Sun.–Thurs., 9 am–2 pm,
Fri., 9 am–2 pm
Entrance fee, (04) 639-0950

Ein Hod Artists' Village

Open Sun., Tues., Wed., Thurs.,
10 am–4 pm, Fri., 10 am–2 pm
Free admission, (04) 984-2029

reconstructed iron sheds of the museum at Atlit, one can imagine Schusterman's father dying in one corner and his son planning his daring escape in the other. □



Tamar Hayardeni

A licensed tour guide and research fellow at the Ben-Zvi Institute, Hayardeni has also authored several children's books