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## **Navi della libertà**

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# Navi della libertà

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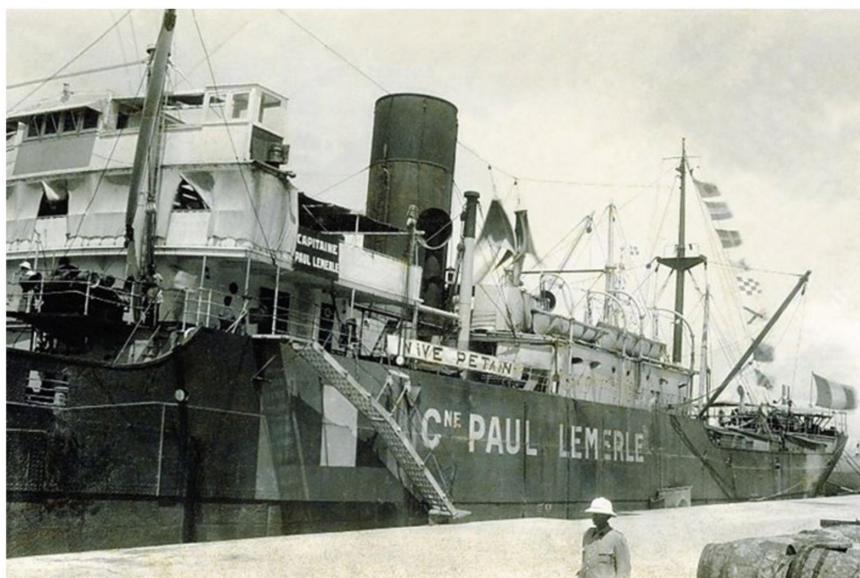
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Maria Bergamo

# Where Europe comes on an end

## The travel of Capitaine Paul-Lemerle (Marseille 1941)

Misha Davidoff\*



Vista del Capitaine Paul-Lemerle en tiempos de Vichy; Société générale des transports maritimes d'Alain Croce, éditions MDV.

On March 24th, 1941, the *Capitaine Paul-Lemerle* left the docks of Marseille. Bound for Martinique, the ship carried some three hundred and fifty refugees fleeing the flames consuming Europe. Though one of many vessels of its kind, this one stands out in part on account of the prominent names of some of its passengers. The German novelist Anna Seghers, for instance, impelled by Jewish roots and communist convictions, was fleeing to Mexico. Claude Lévi-Strauss embarked for similar reasons, though he was headed to the United States. The ethnologist, remembering his voyage in a few pages of *Tristes Tropiques*, portrays another passenger on board:

an uncomfortable André Breton, clad in a fuzzy coat, miserably pacing the deck like a deracinated bear. He also tells of the odd impression made by the revolutionary Victor Serge: intimidatingly acquainted with the likes of Lenin and Trotsky and yet curiously fragile, asexual, like a Buddhist monk or a “principled spinster”. Among others, travelled the painter Vlady – Serge’s son – and Breton’s surrealist coterie, which included Wilfredo Lam, André Masson, and Jacqueline Lamba. Incidentally, it was on that same boat that a young man of nineteen, my grandfather Jacques Davidoff, along with his brother Leon and his parents Grisha and Manya, crossed the Atlantic.

It had been almost a year since France signed the armistice with the Third Reich and it was only a matter of time before Nazis widened the range of their persecution south of the Loire, where the “free” regime of Vichy maintained a provisional vestige of political autonomy. This fragile and foreseeably short-lived balance unleashed a veritable migratory torrent toward the south of France – all the more intensified by the generalized expectation that the Germans were not long to arrive. All kinds of undesirables, Jews, Spanish republicans, communists, and blacklisted artists and intellectuals wandered hurriedly through Vichy France in search of visas, transit permits, and exit tickets. “Each one of us”, writes Anna Seghers, “had a particularly persuasive reason not to fall into the hands of the Germans”.

By 1941, passes for transatlantic travel were scarce and considerable bureaucratic obstacles stood in the way of acquiring the requisite transit papers. Some, like Serge and Seghers, relied on the political connections of fellow comrades to obtain their visas; others, like Breton, Masson and Lévi-Strauss benefited from the help of universities and organizations such as the Emergency Rescue Committee. Among those destitute of such cultural and political capital, some found recourse in family members who were already settled in the American continent. Such was the case of the Davidoffs; they obtained Mexican visas through one of Manya’s brothers, who had been living for several years in Mexico. We remember him as uncle Alberto, the dandy.

Alberto Kosowski liked women, gambling, and boxing – predilections that did not befit his family’s traditional ways. His father, Asher, owned a flour-



mill and was by all accounts considered a Tzadik in the Jewish community of Grodno: an observant, righteous, and respectable man. Asher did not tolerate his son's lifestyle, so he sent him off as far away as possible, to fend for himself on the other side of the Atlantic. In the thirties, it was easy to get papers to leave Europe; the question lay only in procuring oneself a ticket. Asher could not know the consequences the exile of his son would have.

Around a decade later, Alberto's sister, Manya, was in Marseille with her husband and her two sons; visas in hand. Alberto had since taken up the trade of furrier in Mexico City and, so the story goes, counted among his clients certain politicians – presumably accompanied by wives or lovers – who were charmed (or moved) enough to pull strings at the Secretariat of Foreign Relations on behalf of the young salesman and his endangered family. All who descend from Manya and Grisha owe our lives to Alberto, to his having been the person he was. For it is the same aspects of his personality that ostracized him from his homeland which also enabled him to find quick footing in a new world and eventually to ingratiate himself with powerful men there. Asher's righteous conservatism saved Alberto – as well as his three sisters, Bertha, Manya, and Niuta – by sending him away, but it also delayed his own resolution to leave his home behind until it was too late. Asher and his wife, Henie, were murdered by the Germans, along with their son Yitzchak and so many others. I do not know what happened to their eldest son, Pima.

In those times, Marseille buzzed with rumors and gossip about ships set to sail, still-available tickets, and unexpected cancelations; about required exit papers; about countries that opened or closed their doors. "Age-old harbor gossip", Seghers called it,

[...] that hasn't ceased as long as there's been a Mediterranean Sea; Phoenician chatter, Cretan, Greek, and Roman gossip. There had never been a shortage of gossips, anxious about their spot aboard a ship and about their money, fleeing from all the real and imagined dangers of the world. Mothers who had lost their children, children who had lost their mothers. Remnants of crushed armies, escaped slaves, human hordes chased from all countries on earth that reached the sea where they threw themselves onto ships to discover new lands from which they would again be chased; forever

running from one death toward another. The ships had always had to lay anchor here, exactly at this place, for here Europe came to an end and here is where the sea began.

Where Europe came to an end (as it still does) – where the structures that govern the world only reach by crumbling into a polyglot tumult of migrants between nations, continents, and epochs – there met the histories of Wilfredo and Manya, those of Anna and Jacqueline, as they boarded the *Paul-Lemerle*.

The duration of the trip was considerably lengthened by the frequent stops along the North African and Atlantic coasts. The crew does not seem to have shared the reason for so many detours with the passengers. Among the testimonies of the notable personalities on board, only Lévi-Strauss' offers an explanation – and this in an openly speculative way. The ethnologist supposes that the ship must have been loaded with some sort of “clandestine equipment”, since so much stopping, or so one heard, was a way of avoiding inspections by the British fleet. Lévi-Strauss' speculation is an attempt to make sense of a paradoxical situation: why should a transport of refugees hide from the British when these refugees are fleeing, precisely, the enemies of the British? And while we are at it, why would the collaborationists of Vichy allow the enemies of their masters to flee?

Surprisingly, my aunt Ruti seems far better to understand what was going on than the famous academic did. She was the wife of Leon, who was fifteen when he traveled on the *Paul-Lemerle*. Based on what my uncle must have told her about his journey, Ruti explains that the mysterious contraband that the *Paul-Lemerle* carried was a shipment of magnetic mines which the Germans planned to sow in Mediterranean and Atlantic waters. Apparently, as he recounted, one could make out “the tip” (*la puntita*) of the German submarine escorting the cargo of explosive mines. A wonderful, infinitesimal and possibly (hopefully!) veridical piece of the historical puzzle – we owe it to Leon and Ruti. In May of '41, the borders of Vichy were legally closed to all emigrants. The *Paul-Lemerle* was the last transport to the Caribbean authorized by a government increasingly controlled by Germany. According to Ruti, the only reason that the *Paul-*

*Lemerle* was able to set off was that shipment of German mines, for the protection of which the refugees served as a “human shield”.

Such an expression evokes the language of Victor Serge when he calls the boat a “floating concentration camp”, though without elaborating much further. The descriptions offered by Lévi-Strauss give content to the brief observations of his admired co-traveller. The ship was only equipped with two cabins, together capable of accommodating a mere seven privileged passengers among the three hundred and fifty. The ship’s hold had to be upholstered with narrow, shabby mattresses, in order to shelter all the rest. According to Lévi-Strauss, however, it was the hygienic conditions which most contributed to the suffering of the passengers:

Symmetrically disposed along the rails, to port for the men and to starboard for the women, the crew had set up two pairs of shacks made of planks, without air or light; one contained a few shower-heads that were only supplied in the mornings; the other, barely furnished with a long wooden trough roughly coated with zinc, served the purpose one would imagine.

Almost mockingly, the ethnologist remembers the “delicate ones” who were “loath of collective squatting”, recounting that instead of “land! land!”, the general cry “a bath, finally a bath!” resounded when an island pierced the horizon. No doubt, there is something ridiculous in the clash between the squeamishness of the passengers and the conditions of the ship. Nevertheless, Lévi-Strauss does not fail to note a “discreet and pathetic” note in such hygienic yearning; for it is as if the latter betrayed a wounded human dignity that yet refuses resignation in the face of suffering.

Despite the indignities of overpopulation, the vision of the life still awaiting them was never lost for the refugees aboard the *Paul-Lemerle*. Precisely, it was this prospect they had won by boarding the ship. If indeed they were inmates in a floating camp and if indeed they would still have to remain for months in the camp, le *Lazaret*, in Pointe du Bout, this condition was provisional. In principle, they were already free persons, each one contemplating differently the future before them.

After close to a month of voyage, on April 20th, the passengers peered out through the waves at the apparition of the Caribbean. Not everyone experienced this equally. Some, like Serge, had left “only to return” and never contemplated the “untold landscapes” of the western hemisphere as a definitive refuge – even if they were to expire there, as he did. They did not wrest their eyes from the old continent, which in its conflagration was still to be the stage for a continuing internationalist struggle in which they saw themselves as active participants. Restless with desire for battle, counting forty “comrades” accompanying him on board, Serge envisioned the victory to come all the more clearly as European coasts became remote.

Others, who must have been the majority, had their gaze fixed on the fantastic horizons opening in front of them. Breton describes “those who wouldn’t stop breathing in for that tip of verdure, still in the distance”. I picture them, looking through binoculars that “ravished the distance between common perception and the dreams of the poet”, already savoring the succulent life that sylvan splendor promised them. I do not doubt that Jacques and Leon were among them. Young and ready to forget the indignities they had borne, they were to make a new life in a Mexico that was opening its doors. There, they built houses that still stand and they bequeathed to their families a place in the world. It is in memory of both of them that I tell this story.

*\*I am grateful to the editors of Ímulus, Andrea Ruy Sánchez and Priscila Vanneuville, for permission to republish, with slight revisions, the essay that appeared on their pages in December 2015, “Donde Europa llega a su fin”. All translations are my own.*

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## English abstract

“Where Europe comes to an end” is an essay on historical recollection and imagination. It relates the story of the last ship of refugees to leave Vichy-France during the Second World War, the Capitaine Paul-Lemerle, by weaving together the written testimonies of distinguished passengers (Claude Lévi-Strauss, Anna Seghers, and Victor Serge among others) with the oral history of more obscure co-travelers, who passed it down to the author. The polyphony of voices reveals a diversity of perspectives on a single voyage—differing attempts to contemplate the meaning of leaving behind a world in flames—a diversity that nevertheless converges in the pursuit of freedom.

*keywords* | Claude Lévi-Strauss; Anna Seghers; Victor Serge; André Breton; WWII France; Vichy regime.

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(v. Albo dei referee di Engramma)*



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