SEVENTY YEARS AGO, a ship once almost abandoned for scrap launched from Baltimore’s harbor to start a six-month journey to Europe, where it would pick up thousands of Jewish refugees fleeing the wreckage of World War II and take them to Israel.

The ship was called Exodus 1947, and this month, largely as a result of the tenacity of Maryland resident Jerry Klinger, a memorial to the ship, its crew and its passengers was dedicated in Haifa, Israel, at the same port where British destroyers intercepted, attacked and prevented the ship from docking and delivering its human cargo.

Klinger, 69, was first captivated by the story of the Exodus 1947 after hearing the first strains of Ernest Gold’s majestic score for the 1960 film “Exodus.”

“I was typical of everybody..."
at that age. Seeing the movie, your heart stirs when you hear the music,” said Klinger, a grandfather who splits his time between Derwood, Md. and Boynton Beach, Fla. “This thing became a mega-hit. God knows how many people saw the movie.”

As the young son of Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen survivors, Klinger also read “Exodus” by Jewish Baltimore-born Leon Uris, whose 1958 bestseller was inspired by the Exodus 1947 saga. Klinger credits the book with giving him an overview, albeit romanticized and fictionalized, of how the Jewish underground in British-controlled Palestine put pressure on British occupiers.

“The dialogue is probably one of the most historically accurate descriptions of the meaning of the birth of Israel and Zionism,” he said.

The true story of the Exodus 1947 helped turn the tide of sentiment toward the hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees seeking sanctuary after World War II and their quest for a Jewish state — what would become, in 1948, the new nation of Israel.

However, the Exodus saga was largely forgotten over the ensuing decades, and although there are memorials to the ship at Baltimore’s Inner Harbor, in France, in Italy and even in Germany, there had never been a memorial in the one place the refugees were striving to reach — Israel.

Keepers of the Flame

The childhood flame of inspiration that was lit for Jerry Klinger by Leon Uris’ book and at the movie theater stayed with him until he found a way to use it in his retirement.

A former executive with Merrill Lynch, Klinger founded the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation in 1999. The idea came out of a trip to hunt down a historic synagogue in New Mexico.
When he found the site, but no acknowledgement of the former Temple Montefiore, he decided a memorial plaque was in order so future generations would know the historical significance of the 1884 building. Eighteen years later, and Klinger has researched, funded, designed and installed more than 40 memorials honoring significant Jewish people, places and events in 29 states and five foreign countries, including three in Maryland.

In 1997, Dr. Barry S. Lever of Pikesville spearheaded the installation of an Exodus memorial in Baltimore's Inner Harbor for the 50th anniversary. About 10 years later, Klinger tried to rally interest and support for a memorial to the Exodus ship in Israel but hit too many roadblocks.

"I just got shut out, one thing after another," he said. "Perhaps, as we would say, it wasn’t beshert, it wasn’t intended to work out."

A few years later, Klinger worked with Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to bring the remains of Col. John Henry Patterson, the so-called godfather of Israeli Defense Forces, to Israel for reburial. It was then he met Israeli sculptor Sam Philipe.

"We talked about projects in Israel, and I was telling him, by the way, here’s an idea I’ve had for a long time. This was something he’d also thought about," Klinger said. "So, it came together, between the two of us. As little as even four or five months ago, Sam and I didn’t know how big this thing was going to become — whether it just going to be me and him, a warm Coke and a couple of stale cookies. We had no idea."

The Ship
The rusting hulk purchased secretly in Baltimore by Haganah operatives in 1946 for $40,000 had enjoyed a 14-year career as the Baltimore Steam Packet Co.’s Chesapeake Bay pleasure cruise ship President Warfield that plied the Chesapeake Bay from Baltimore to Norfolk, Va., for the Old Bay Line from 1928 until it was acquired by the War Shipping Department in 1942. Following service with the British and U.S. Navy as a troop transport, training vessel, and support for the Normandy invasion, it was sold for scrap. But Haganah leaders, who were using much smaller ships for their clandestine Jewish immigration mission, Aliyah Bet, decided it was time to start moving thousands of refugees, instead of hundreds. The acceleration of the mission would increase pressure on the British, who were stopping ships from reaching the British Mandate of Palestine and transferring refugees to displaced-persons camps in Cyprus.

The ship, 330 feet long, was designed to carry 400 to 500 passengers but would be refitted with bunks and toilets and loaded with enough food and water for a seven-day voyage from France to the British Mandate of Palestine — with more than 4,500 Holocaust refugees. The ship was made seaworthy in Baltimore on a pier off Lancaster Street and departed in late February 1947. It was refitted later with accommodations for thousands of passengers and, in anticipation of a British attack, with defense systems including netting, fencing and pipes for oiling the deck to slow down boarding soldiers.

The Crew
A crew of more than 40 men, mostly Jewish Americans, some ex-GIs, some with no sailing experience, some as young as 16 or 17 years old, found their way to Baltimore, which wasn’t easy, as Aliyah Bet missions were carried out in secrecy. Joining the Americans on the Warfield, later renamed Exodus 1947, were Jews from the British Mandate of Palestine, some Haganah and Palmach (Haganah’s fighting force) men. Yossi Harel had commanded other Aliyah Bet missions and Ike Aronovitz became the ship’s captain.

"I can only talk about myself, and I wanted to save the people. That’s why I came aboard," said crewman Bernard Marks, in the 1997 PBS documentary, “Exodus 1947.”

“So, what we have is an American ship, an American crew, and the ship is American funded. Now the memorial is American funded,” Klinger said. “So, we have a little bit of..."
this coming together, and the intimate link of the story of Israel and the story of America is symbolized in real terms and in terms of imagery, and our relationship is through the Exodus."

Also brought on board by Haganah as a witness to the mission was the Rev. John Stanley Grauel, a young Methodist minister who had become sympathetic to the plight of Jews after attending a Zionist conference in New Jersey near the war’s end.

"Grauel was put on the ship for one purpose — because it was very probable the British were going to be able to take the Exodus. It was the largest effort ever done in terms of movement of refugees. So, if the ship was taken, somebody has to get the information out," Klinger said. "They said he was a journalist. What his real job was, if the ship was taken, was to tell the story. Because they knew people wouldn’t believe the story if a Jew told it. But what if a Christian told the story? It would be received differently, and that’s exactly what happened."

Grauel eventually testified before the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine. Later, the committee finally interviewed Exodus refugees in the displaced persons camps in Germany, and the tide was turned. The committee, which had previously been against partition, voted in November 1947 in favor of partitioning Palestine and creating a Jewish state.

**The Survivor**

Arie Itamar was only 8 1/2 years old when he boarded the Exodus in France with hopes of reaching the British Mandate of Palestine. He was a refugee from Eastern Soviet Union whose father was killed in World War II. His family fled to Tajikistan when the Germans invaded Russia, but...
the family ended up in Ainring, a displaced persons camp in Germany near the Austrian border. In June 1947, the family secured fake passports and boarded a truck bound for France and the Exodus, where they would eventually crowd into a small cabin with three other families.

“The strongest memory was the boarding on the Exodus, when children of youth movements and [orphanages] boarded and were singing songs of struggle and hope,” Itamar said in an email. “Then, the night of the battle was terrifying and difficult, [and later the next morning], the first glance of our land from Haifa harbor.”

“My narrative of excitement and adventures is not much known. The adults were worried, some of the children had no ability to describe events like [normal] children because they were from death camps and ghettos,” he added.

In his 2013 book about his experiences, “Misty Mists,” translated from Hebrew, Itamar recalled the terror below decks in the early morning hours of July 18, 1947, as the British attacked the Exodus just before it reached Haifa.

“Explosions and gunfire were heard, bumps and shocks were felt as the British ships knocked our ship. Tear gas bombs penetrated the inner decks. My dad pulled out some handkerchiefs, wetted them with water from the canteen and handed them to us. ... The jerking grew more and more frequent, more tear gas penetrated the ship, more shooting occurred. Suddenly we saw people covered in blood streaming towards the inner deck.”

The Exodus was rammed repeatedly by two British destroyers and eventually boarded by soldiers using tear gas and guns, against a formidable defense by passengers using mostly tins of food and potatoes. But after 150 people were wounded and three killed, including American crewman Bill Bernstein, ship commander Harel and captain Aronovitz halted the fighting and handed over the ship.

“As soon as the ship came in, they transferred all of the people within minutes to three prison ships,” Klinger said.

British foreign Minister Ernest Bevin decided instead of transporting the refugees to camps in Cyprus, the convoy would return to Europe to make an example of the illegal missions. But upon arrival in France, the French government refused to forcibly remove the refugees. The ships languished at Port-de-Bouc in the summer heat, and refugees staged a hunger strike. Instead, the ships went to Hamburg, Germany, where the refugees were forcibly removed and put in British-controlled camps — some adjacent to the very death camps the Jewish refugees had survived.

“We were brought to a British detention camp near Hamburg, called Am Stau,” Itamar said. But three months later, freedom and hope arrived with Haganah agents. “We were smuggled out in December 1947, by a British military ambulance, traveling to Marseille, France, boarding a tourist ship with fabricated tourist passports and arrived in Haifa Dec. 31, 1947.”

Itamar survived his Odyssean journey. At 78, he lives in the Beit-Nir kibbutz in the south of Israel, holds a Ph.D. in geology from Hebrew University and lectures on the immigrant experience and the saga of the Exodus.

The Sculptor

Sam Philipe, a well-known Israeli sculptor, and fifth-generation Jerusalemite, had already made his mark with sculpting projects at home and abroad when he met Klinger and heard his big idea.

“The Exodus was something that really triggered...
“THE STORY OF THE EXODUS SHIP IS SO IMPORTANT TO TEACH BECAUSE IT IS EMBLEMATIC OF THE MULTIPLE WAYS IN WHICH WE CONNECT AS A JEWISH PEOPLE; OUR COLLECTIVE MEMORY AS A NATION; OUR DEEP CONNECTION TO ISRAEL; OUR COMMUNAL OBLIGATION TO SAVE ANOTHER JEW FROM SUFFERING.”

— Amian Frost Klemmer, CEO Center for Jewish Education, which includes the Exodus 1947 story in its curriculum
The whole story — the meaning of the ship of Exodus to the creation of the state of Israel,” Philipe said. “But, you know, an artist’s idea is a long way from an idea to reality. And Mr. Klinger made my idea become real.”

Built on a base of Jerusalem stone, the memorial combines his bronze sculpture of Israel supporting a replica Exodus anchor with interpretive plaques detailing the ship’s saga in Hebrew, English and Arabic. The base of the statue is inscribed with “The Ship That Launched a Nation.”

“I also want to emphasize the input which Mr. Klinger gave to the whole project, as far as the accurate historical events,” Philipe said. “The participation of the Americans in the beginning — it wasn’t just a Jewish enterprise, the Exodus. It was Americans, American Jews, volunteers, Jews and Christians combined.”

Fabrication of the bronze sculpture took six to seven months, but Philipe said finding the right location was more difficult. Through his contacts with Haifa port officials, permission was granted to locate the sculpture in the International Cruise Ship Terminal in Haifa, where, Klinger estimates, 500,000 people a year will pass by the Exodus memorial.

Philipe’s connection to the project came early on when he and Klinger visited the grave of Exodus crewman Bernstein, who was killed during the battle with the British.

“We spent a whole afternoon looking for his grave. That was emotional. Nobody goes there. Nobody visits him,” Philipe said. “But we came after 70 years to give tribute to Bill Bernstein. Then Jerry pulled out the letters that he wrote to family [from the ship]. That really touched my heart.”

Sculptor Sam Philipe fabricates the bronze sculpture of Israel for the memorial.

The Ceremony

On July 18, the 70th anniversary of the British attack, more than 700 people attended the dedication of the Exodus 1947 memorial unveiling, including Israeli and American officials, new immigrants, soldiers, Holocaust survivors and 150 former passengers of the Exodus.

“In the last couple weeks we turned down hundreds and hundreds of people who wanted to come. If we’d had a different venue, a different setting, we probably could have had as many as 10,000 people,” Klinger said. “But it was impossible. We were in a secure zone within the port. We were trying to stay within an air-conditioned environment, we had a lot of seniors.

So we couldn’t do it outside because of the heat.”

Shuli Natan, an Israeli singing institution, sang “Jerusalem of Gold.” Also in attendance were Michael Snowden from the American Embassy who stood in when Ambassador David Friedman became ill; Yoav Galant, former IDF commander; David Breakstone and Natan Sharansky from the Jewish Agency; Benny Katz, Jerusalem liaison; Yael Antebi, Municipality of Jerusalem; Harold ‘Smoky’ Simon, chairman World Machal, Israel Office; Donna Parker, board member, American Veterans of Israel Legacy Corp.; Sam Philipe; Arie Itamar and Dr. Barry S. Lever.

“Yossi Harel’s daughter came. Ike Aronovitz’s family was there. They were all there,” Klinger said.

He was touched by former Exodus passengers who approached him during the event.

“People would come up to me, sometimes walking, sometimes in wheelchairs. And we’d talk, and they would hand me their little biographies, their little stories of their lives, usually a single sheet and say, “This is my story,” he said. “Nobody had told their story in Israel. Here, we were doing something for them, because they had done so much for all of us.”

But Klinger, always in motion, was already moving past the dedication, even as it was happening. For him, the highlight of the whole experience was not the ceremony, but what happens after the ceremony.

“When I think back to all the projects I’ve done — this is my sixth project in Israel — I’ve gotten the most recognition from this one, but I don’t do it for the recognition. I do it because this is a hole in our history, and it’s an obligation,” he said. “I can guarantee you that an extraordinarily high number of people in Israel, the United States, everywhere, don’t know the real story of the Exodus. We have to remember the past, because if we don’t remember the past, how are we going to have a future?”