

***The adventure of MS "Athina" to be renamed "Rafiah"  
Piraeus – Sapienza – to Bakar Yugoslavia - Fall 1946***

*September 1946. This vessel was purchased by the Mossad Le'Aliya Bet - "Institute for Illegal Immigration" - in order to transport, illegally ± 700 immigrants, Holocaust survivors from Europe to Palestine. Due to temporary financial delays, seller and buyer agreed to relocate the vessel from Piraeus to a protected bay in the island of "Sapienza", out of reach of the Greek and British authorities.*

*Once this matter was settled, We, a group of 6 Israeli escorts: Yossi Hamburger-Harel, Abraham Lichovsky as Gid'oni (wireless operator), David Baumgarten, myself - Reuven Yatir (then: Hirsch), one Marine Eng., and a young boy named Cohen from Saloniki, sailed in a fish cutter from Salamis Bay to Sapienza island. The Greek Captain had received sailing instructions and advice about our boarding the vessel for the voyage.*

*We arrived at noon the following day. The crew rowed ashore to supplement provisions. And then heaved anchor and sailed at fair weather against a medium northerly wind and sea into the Ionian Sea. Navigation at that time in the open sea was hazardous due post war floating mines. We choose to sail through inland water, i.e. east of Zante Island, Cefalonia towards the Levkas channel. That evening the vessel went aground due to wrongly identified lighthouses, - green / red. The next day our men from Athens arrived at the scene, with agent and surveyor. A tug pulled us off the shoal. No damage was detected. But the British authorities showed, in our view, "unwarranted" interest in the identity of the vessel and crew. Was she really the vessel registered in their book, meant for Armenian refugees to be taken to the Black sea? We Israelis hid in the ship's hold. The Captain was instructed to tie up at a wharf at Levkas for further orders. The same evening a fish cutter came alongside, to have us, Israelis, removed from the scene. We cruised at leisure for a day or two along the coast, out of sight by curious onlookers.*

*By midnight, we returned to our "Athina" went aboard and called the crew out. We told them to start the engine and make ready for escape, full speed, towards the near Albanian coast. – Sorry, no deal. The Greeks may have anticipated such move, they preceeded us and moored a tug in front of our bow, with heavy anchor chains. There was no way out, by any means. Our friend, the fish cutter, had waited at some distance. We called him back, boarded again and disappeared into the night. A. Lichovsky, the wireless operator and technician, had with him our own self made radio and was thus able to maintain contact with our men in Athens.*

*We anchored in the Bay of Patras. After some time, with no contacts nor instructions, we send a crew member ashore to sniffle on the waterfront and bars for gossips referring to the mysterious MS "Athina". Indeed He came back, having heard that this vessel had departed from Levkas with destination Piraeus, around the Peloponnesus. We decided to try to intercept her and "Change her course" to Yugoslavia. A short calculation, assuming her course and speed, against ours, fixed the point of "rendezvous". We made it in time, asked the Captain "for assistance", made fast on his starboard side and boarded. I addressed the Captain and advised him to ignore his instructions or to hand over command to me.*

*Meanwhile my colleagues had spread over the vessel, the bridge, the engine room and assembled the crew on the foredeck. Lichovsky went straight to the radioroom and secured this part of the ship. The young Jewish Greek, Cohen, a survivor of the holocaust, spoke to the crew in their language, explained that this is a hijack, and "please refrains from foolish acts". He showed them our one revolver in his hip, to emphasize that we meant it. I took to the bridge and turned the ship around, set course to Split Yugoslavia, for the pilot. The voyage proceeded normally, Lichovsky advised our people in Athens and Yugoslavia of our ETA Split.*

*On arrival Authorities and the pilot boarded, we resumed soon our last leg: Split to Bakar, the port of embarkation of the refugees transport. Due to still prevailing danger of floating mines in the Adriatic, we sailed only by day, anchored at night. The second and last night, the commander on the isle of "RAB" invited us for a meal and a night in their hotel. This was our first night after a long while in a bed and with a shower.*

*On arrival at "Cicrenica", not far from "Bakar", our men in Yugoslavia greeted us warmly and dispersed us to our respective duties. Yossi Hamburger and I were allocated to the SS "Knesset Israel" She had been part of the commercial dealing, besides the MV "Athina" but had **slid** out of Piraeus harbour and proceeded directly to "Bakar".*

*This is not a significant event in the history of the glorious Illegal immigration by sea, except for the fact that the vessel "Athina" was saved from certain arrest in Piraeus, through the initiative and daring of a handful of Palyamniks, for the benefit of sailing as scheduled with her refugees.*

*Composed in Hebrew, March 2000*

*The English version dates today 22-Dec-07*

*Reuven Yatur - Hirsch*