

MS Amos - Formerly Aliya Bet ship Artemissia



Amos was built in 1894 by Holmes & Co.

Gross tonnage: 221 tons, net: 116 tons.

Length: 37 meters, width: 6.40 meters

As retold in the book: "From Velos to Taurus" by Aryeh L. Avnery –
Published by "Ha'Kibbutz Ha'Meuchad", pages 44-45

Artemissia

At the beginning of 1938, emissaries were sent from Ha'Chalutz (a Zionist youth movement) to Athens to find ways to expand Aliya Bet (illegal immigration) by acquiring larger vessels. They scouted around Greece for two months, and finally ran into the Pinochi Brothers. They were the owners of fishing vessels, one of which was the Artemissia, a ship of 200 tons. Pinochi managed to get a license to carry passengers for the vessel. How did he get the license? Pinochi's coal supplier told his friend, the Assistant Minister for the Navy, that such a license would provide more work for Greek sailors and bring in dollars.

The emissaries signed a contract with the ship-owners and notified their home office. They asked the home office to send an experienced sailor along who would be an aid to the ship's captain. They also told Levi Schwartz in Warsaw to prepare 130 young pioneers for immigration. Amiram Shochat, one of the "Yarkon Boys" and an experienced sailor, was drafted by Davidka and sent to Piraeus. When Amiram had a close look at the ship he was scared out of his wits. He wrote: "I knew that 130 young people who were not seamen, and had never before been on a ship of any kind, were to sail on that ship during the winter months. I was afraid that they would suffer a shock which would not be forgotten by them for a long time."

Room No. 17 in the Histadrut building was the center of clandestine operations for Aliya Bet at that time. This was the headquarters where Eliahu Golomb, Yisrael Galili and Shaul Avigur met. In the adjoining room sat Moishale Chervinski, who was the office manager and treasurer. Ephraim Dekel heard about the ship at the police station and informed Moishale, who informed Davidka, who sent a message to Athens: "The police know about the ship and the coast guard is on the alert. Do not leave without proper small boats. How long can your food and fuel last? When the coast is clear we shall play the 'International'" (the ship only had a receiver). On the 25th of April, 1938, the ship approached the shore opposite Kibbutz Mitzpe Yam. The 'International' record was played and the unloading of the ma'apilim (illegal immigrants) started. They left the ship in groups of between 7 and 12 men each, rowed to shore and scattered to various hiding places. Artemissia sailed back to Greece with Amiram Shochat and Levi Schwartz on board and was ready for her second voyage.

The British were aware that a ship had succeeded in leaving Greece and reaching Palestine. The British Ambassador sent a stiff note of reprimand to the Greek foreign office for allowing such an action, which was contrary to the best interests of Great Britain. The Greek foreign minister answered: "Why does the Palestine Government place the responsibility for that action on the Greek Government, when the Palestinian Government did not take proper measures to prevent the immigrants from reaching the shore?"

This exchange became known to the Police Commander of the Athens district and he notified Levi Schwartz and advised that they depart Greece as soon as possible. This time, 157 young people were loaded onto the ship, and it carried a radio and the radioman, Chaim Friedlander. Chaim recalls this sea voyage as very calm and uneventful: "When I sailed on the Poseidon we did not yet dare to put young women on the ship, but now on the Artemissia, the presence of women made for a more relaxed and civilized atmosphere, and despite the very crowded conditions, there were parties and song fests and a wall-newspaper was published".

When the ship approached the shore light signals were sent, but these could not be seen because the whole shore had been lit up. Davidka then asked his friends at the electric company to shut off the power for this part of the coast. All went dark suddenly and the signals were then received. Artemissia reached the coast in July of 1938 and was not caught. The ma'apilim were removed and brought to safe places and the ship took off again.

On the way back to Greece a fierce storm arose. The poor captain of the ship was unable to enter a safe port because he was afraid the authorities would check the ship's papers, according to which he was carrying 157 passengers and there was no official record about offloading them... (In Piraeus no one would have paid attention to this lapse).

Artemissia continued to serve in pre-WW-II Aliya Bet. Twice she transferred ma'apilim to Palestine from the ship Draga, once from the ship Jiffo, and twice from the ship Ali. At the end, the British confiscated her.

Amos

At the end of 1938 the Atid Company bought the ship from the British (this company acted as a front for the Hagana) and its name was changed to "Amos." The ship was used to move cargo between British military bases in the Eastern Mediterranean. Under a special agreement between the Hagana and the ship's owners, Amos served as a practical training vessel for about 15 Palyamniks who served as crew members.