

Mediterranean Shipping



CRUISE SHIP COMEBACK

GIANTS EYE UP THE MEDITERRANEAN

CYPRUS FLAG REVAMP

ISLAND SEEKS TO IMPROVE IMAGE

A TYCOON'S GLORIOUS EPILOGUE

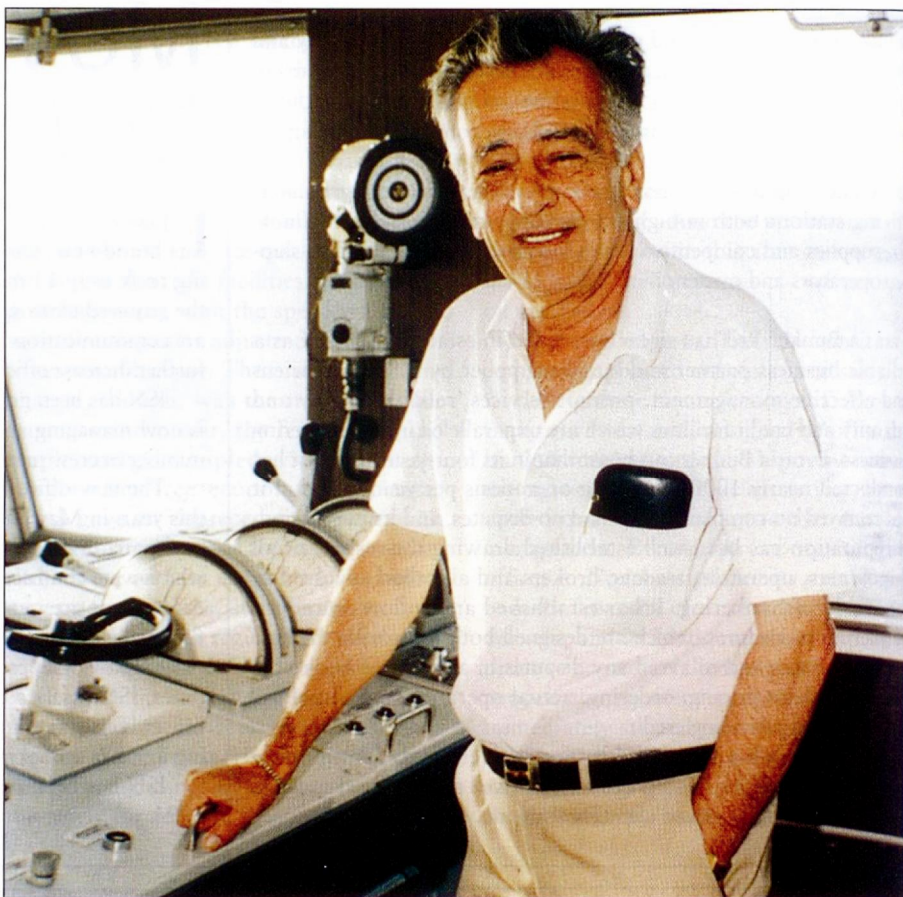
Having been the pioneers in the establishment of national shipping in Cyprus, SOL Lines had to carry out all the appropriate experimental operations with a view to developing the passenger and ro-ro traffic to and from Cyprus. The company's aims were not limited to the private interests of the company, but were directed by the general interests of Cyprus.

The fact that the company had inaugurated and maintained a year-round weekly service for 10 consecutive years would suffice to prove SOL's contribution to the island's economy, not to mention the extensive publicity given to Cyprus as a maritime country. For the evacuation of the PLO fighters out of Lebanon in 1982, three SOL ships (*SOL Phryne*, *SOL Express*, and the *SOL Georgios*) were chartered by the Department of Trade in London on behalf of the International Red Cross — these ships had given the greatest publicity to Cyprus.

In general terms, Mr Solomonides' company has been acting throughout the period of its existence as the national carrier of Cyprus without having any of the presupposed privileges of subsidy, preferential treatment, protection etc, which would enable it to cover the natural loss which is involved in experimental, as well as off-season operations. The fact that SOL Lines managed to continue trading for over 10 consecutive years (1977-88) was a miracle, whereas the cessation of the company's activities is to be lamented.

Mr Solomonides had the idea of linking Cyprus, Greece and Italy with a passenger line using vessels belonging to Greek owners. This, in fact, was happening for many years, but as he pointed out, no sooner would one Greek company become established on the line than, for one reason or another, it would withdraw its vessels. 'It was a kind of nightmare as to who would operate the line, and a very difficult task,' Mr Solomonides recalled.

The pact that Mr Solomonides made with the island of his birth when he first struggled to put the *SOL Phryne* into service was that come rain or shine, there would be a weekly sailing linking Cyprus and Greece. He claims that, in all weathers and conditions, the company has fulfilled its promise. Mr Solomonides admits, 'I'm an ambitious man and I'd like to see what we started being successful.' The present generation is not marine-minded, but at least with the attraction of regular calls at a home port, and the wider choice of ports of call (Beirut, Lattakia, Haifa, Rhodes, Heraklio, Piraeus, Corfu, Dubrovnic, Venice, Brindisi etc) due to the extension of the company's fleet, Mr



Solomonides believes that more young Cypriots could be attracted to the seagoing profession.

IN THE BEGINNING ...

Takis Solomonides Shipping Agency was established in Limassol in 1956. Branches were eventually set up throughout the island and also in Athens, Piraeus and London. The company specialised in the passenger shipping agency business and, as such, had attracted many passenger ferries, cruise ships and ocean liners to call regularly at Famagusta and/or Limassol. In 1960, Solomonides had visualised the possibility of Cyprus developing a merchant shipping industry and becoming a maritime centre. To this effect he established close and friendly relations with the secretary general of the Greek Ministry of Merchant Marine who eventually assisted in the establishment of the Cyprus Maritime Law in cooperation with the Cyprus Ministry of Communications and Works. By 1961, Mr Solomonides had started urging Cypriots to go to sea by taking employment on Greek ships which he represented, expressing at the same time the firm belief that sooner or later Cyprus would be able to acquire her own merchant navy and their own ships. Many articles were written by Mr Solomonides urging the

government to improve the Law in order to be able to increase the total number of only 30 ships registered in Cyprus until 1966.

Considering that all passenger liners calling at Cyprus were operating on a seasonal basis, thus isolating the island during the winter months, Mr Solomonides had decided to direct his efforts towards securing a ship of his own, enabling him to maintain a year-round link of Cyprus with Greece. In March 1977, the passenger/car ferry *SOL Phryne* was acquired and served the Cyprus/Greece line on a round-the-year basis for 10 consecutive years. This fact alone would suffice to prove the contribution by Mr Solomonides to the island's economy. Throughout this period he held the firm belief that the Cyprus government would finally realise the necessity of introducing certain regulations that would support Cypriot ship's interests and protect them against unethical competition of ships operating only during the profit-making periods.

PLANTING HIS FEET

Mr Solomonides began his career in shipping humbly enough as an office clerk employed with a passenger shipping line. By steadily moving upwards within the shipping industry, his personal visions of attracting Greek shipping to Cyprus began



to take shape and became a reality when he initiated trading with his own company, Takis Solomonides Ltd. His company in London was named SOL Shipping Ltd.

Mr Solomonides, realising that companies who operated during the summer months, neglecting the unprofitable off-peak winter months, were of little use for business, or, for that matter, for Cyprus itself. Acting upon his conclusions, gleaned after many years in the shipping industry, it was his aim to establish SOL Lines and to introduce to Cyprus in April 1977 the very first car/passenger ferry which would be operable all the year round. Indeed, a leading UK shipping publication, *Ship Broker*, was taken with his success at being able to run the service with clockwork precision all the year round — and with a 29-year-old ship.

The *SOL Phryne* was the only ship which was both registered in Cyprus and which also flew Cyprus' flag. Mr Solomonides was very much involved with bringing the first cruises to the shores of Cyprus. A pioneer in this sense, the *SOL Phryne* was the first ship instrumental in establishing trading links with the Middle East by calling weekly at Latakia in Syria, aiding Cyprus' exports to a significant degree as well as enabling tourists an economical means to travel around the eastern Mediterranean in comfort. The ports of call, in this instance, were Latakia, Limassol and Greece, creating again with the now estab-

lished pioneering spirit which typifies the business practices of Mr Solomonides, the only sea-link between the Gulf and Europe.

Polarising the comparative success of Mr Solomonides' efforts were circumstances negative to the continuance of his ventures. The Greek shipping lines were incorporating a Cypriot port of call into their domestic itinerary during the high season and justifying any extra outlay they made by picking up additional passenger traffic. As many as three vessels were used in this strategy, which ultimately hurt the Cypriot owner badly. Mr Solomonides was naturally aggrieved by this state of affairs — that the Greek owners could extend their services with impunity whilst the law prohibited him from doing the same in Greece where his services were limited to calls at, for example, Rhodes — and these on an excursion basis only. Indeed, SOL Lines' winter services were the only available Cypriot sea-mail line for the duration of these months.

Mr Solomonides' efforts to right this situation met with little success. SOL Lines lost money by continually maintaining a winter service while facing competition during the summer months, hence he was forced to appeal to the Cypriot Department of Merchant Shipping and both the port authorities and service industries, with the aim of gaining government subsidies during the winter months. Losses are one thing, but losses of the amounts involved in this

instance were too much for the survival of any company for very long. The port authority, too, was unforthcoming towards his appeals for a special port facility for passenger vessels, favouring instead containerised traffic, the result being that passengers had to cross an open quay and encounter the inherent dangers of lorries, fork-lifts, cranes etc. Mr Solomonides is quoted as saying: 'People don't seem to realise Limassol's potential as a passenger port and seem to have ignored the possibilities of increasing this traffic. Egypt and Israel are both only a day's sailing away and thus ideal for short-range cruising. What is also ignored is that Cyprus should develop long-range tourism as well, if it could be used as a stop-off centre for the whole of the Middle East.'

Mr Solomonides, a trailblazer in attempts to develop tourism between Cyprus and Greece and an advocate of cooperation between the two, a one-time publisher of *Hellas Cyprus Tourism*, France's honorary consul in Cyprus since 1963 (having been awarded in 1971 the *Palmes Academiques* and in 1977 the *Legion d'Honneur*), is no longer a shipowner. This is due, to a large extent, to his isolation within the Hellenic political culture. With a lifetime of maritime achievements behind him, Mr Solomonides can now look forward to imparting the wisdom he has gained to those who rightly acknowledge him as a source of shipping knowledge.