

SHIPPING

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Heroism or madness?

The continuing problems of Sol Lines

"He must be a hero or a lunatic", said one member of the Cyprus shipping community in reference to Mr. Takis Solomonides, founder and owner of Sol Lines.

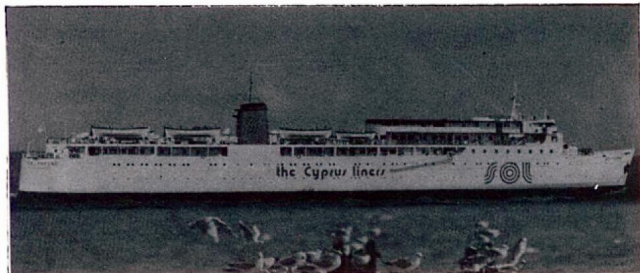


Hero or Lunatic?
But still smiting...

There was no implied disrespect of the tireless operator of the Republic's only passenger/cargo line. On the contrary there was a clear recognition of the obstacles which Mr. Solomonides has faced, and continues to face, in the operation of the sole year-round maritime link which the island has with Greece, and consequently Europe.

The contribution being made by Sol Lines to the island is commonly recognised. The failure he has experienced in getting what he wants from the authorities, whether it be the government, the port authorities or the service industries can be attributed to various causes.

The four vessels belonging to Sol Lines are, at present, not in the best of positions. Two are in extended lay-up at Limassol, while the flagship, the "Sol Olympia" is operating a regular link between Haifa - Limassol - Piraeus - Corfu - Dubrovnik - Venice in fierce competition, and the oldest of the Mr. Solomonides' ships, the



First of the Solomonides fleet - the Sol Phryne

"Sol Phryne" is still maintaining the weekly link between Cyprus and Greece year-round which he vowed when he established the line in 1977.

Every year Mr. Solomonides knows that he must have a certain volume of high-season business in order to cover winter losses incurred through his determined keeping of this promise. And every year, without fail, when the high season starts other ships come onto the line, taking traffic which in other circumstances would be his.

"I like competition, but not unfair competition", laments Mr. Solomonides.

He has approached the Cyprus authorities on many occasions, demanding some form of protection for his line's interests, and reminding them that his vessels are home-ported on the island, bunkered as far as possible, repaired as far as possible and supplied in Cyprus. Yet the Cyprus government is not in favour of protectionism, as it has been publicly stated, and though they may well see his point, they have, as yet, made no indication that anything can be done.

He has also approached Greek Merchant Marine Minister, Mr. George Katsifaras, but despite a warm welcome from the Minister the message was that this was not something which could be dealt with at ministerial/company level, but must be handled at a government level.

Mr. Solomonides also indicated that he had gained the impression that the Greek authorities are upset by vessels flagging out to Cyprus, and perhaps might prove less cooperative than in other eras. "I'm under the impression that the Greeks have decided to chase us - we're the only Cyprus vessels they can get at", he said.

Indeed, Mr. Solomonides has faced problems in Piraeus. The keenness of the Greek authorities at present to up safety standards, and their determination to carry out inspections at the slightest complaint, be it from a qualified surveyor, a seaman or a disgruntled passenger, have resulted in delays to the Sol Lines ships, Mr. Solomonides said.

During our visit to Limassol Mr. Solomonides received warning from the Greek Inspectorate of Merchant Vessels that the "Sol Olympia" would not be allowed to sail from Piraeus unless safety certification was amended to comply with regulations which, apparently, the ship was contravening.

The problems do not stop there, however. At home equally important flies creep into the ointment.

As the "Sol Olympia" comes into Limassol port, Mr. Solomonides would like to have an assurance from the port authorities that he is guaranteed a berth which will facilitate the necessary quick turnaround, while still giving him the opportunity to bunker the vessel. This cannot be done, apparently.

When his vessels need drydocking they must be taken to Piraeus, and then there is not always 100 per



Mr. Christodoulos Veniamin (l) with Mr. Takis Solomonides and Captain of the Sol Olympia Mr. Dimitrios Kraniotis.

cent certainty that there will be space available on demand. All this costs money, and Mr. Solomonides is very much in favour of an idea presently under consideration of setting up a repair and drydocking facility on the island.

He is involved in legal wrangles over port dues which he has been ordered to pay for a 1977 period when the "Sol Phryne" was under repair as well as for back taxes which he claims should not have been levied. "I am the experiment for them to do things", he complains.

Perhaps there is a large degree of truth in Mr. Solomonides claims that he is hard done to. He has certainly had some unfortunate experiences. One of them involved the ro-ro "Sol Georgios", which he bought with the intention of serving trailer trade to the Arab world. By "a purely diabolic coincidence" the Iran-Iraq conflict broke out almost simultaneously with the vessel's purchase, necessitating port changes and an eventual abandonment of the line.

Mr. Solomonides is not, however, likely to give up. He has gritted his teeth in the past and is quite capable of doing it again.

He reckons that he contributes in the range of CY £5 million annually to the island's economy, and notes "If I weren't there foreign shipping companies who would operate on a purely commercial basis would take over".

They are not likely soon to get the chance.

"I am a nationalist", says Mr. Solomonides. "I care about the island's interests in general". He says he doesn't mind the government's policy, and understands that they cannot show discrimination. "But", he adds, "there must be a limit, and the government has to decide if it is interested in national shipping or not. You don't have to be a genius to understand that sooner or later the government has to review its policy or we have to review ours".