

Terror At Sea



By Dov Levy

The world was stunned when Palestinian terrorists hijacked an Italian cruise ship off the coast of Egypt on October 7, 1985. Millions of people followed the news in suspense, until the hijacking came to a happy ending after just two days.

And that's when the real drama began. First came the revelation that a handicapped American Jew had been murdered. Then, the Egyptian government defied the US by providing the hijackers with safe passage home. Americans were thrilled by President Reagan's decisive action to bring the terrorists to justice—and stunned by Italy's efforts to thwart him.

The political repercussions ran deep as the world watched with bated breath while the drama unfolded.



Thursday, October 3, 1985. Another fine day was dawning in Genoa, Italy. As the sun rose over southern Europe, the city's historic harbor became a bustle of activity. Genoa hosts one of the busiest ports in the Mediterranean, and today was no exception.

There were the regular sailors, dockworkers and sea hands, all busy going about their work. Crane operators began to load and unload the cargo ships lined up at the docks. Government inspectors arrived to scrutinize the incoming and outgoing freight, and made sure all the paperwork was in order.

At one end of the port hundreds of passengers began to queue up to board the *MS Achille Lauro*. The *Achille Lauro* was a highly regarded cruise ship whose home port was Genoa. It was scheduled to depart soon on its regular 12-day circuit, with an itinerary that included stops at various ports in Egypt, Israel, Cyprus and Greece.

Security at the port was non-existent. Although airlines had been plagued by a rash of violent hijackings over the past decade,

sea traffic remained completely unaffected. The passengers waved their passports and boarding passes at the officials and were immediately granted entry to the ship. Nobody bothered to check their luggage at all.

Around 750 passengers boarded the cruise ship. Everyone was looking forward to their voyage. As they boarded, the passengers strolled around the large ship to examine the accommodations. One by one they found their berths and began unpacking. There would be plenty of time to settle in and enjoy the journey.

The passengers were joined by 331 crewmembers. These included the captain and his staff, and the engineers and mechanics that operated the control room. There was also the kitchen staff, the stewards, janitors and more. Most of the crew was Italian, augmented by a large contingent of Portuguese. The passengers were an eclectic mix of nationalities from Europe and the Americas, including 19 North Americans. Among them were Leon and Marilyn Klinghoffer, an elderly Jewish couple from New York.

Unnoticed among the hundreds of passengers who boarded that day were four young men. Quiet and dark-skinned, they stuck to themselves. Unlike the others, they had not joined the cruise for pleasure, but for terror.

Once everyone had boarded, the ship's crew radioed to shore for permission to embark. The dockhands undid the chains that kept the ship moored and the ship's foghorn delivered the traditional blast. Soon the ship was gliding smoothly over the waters as it headed out toward the Mediterranean.

MS Achille Lauro

January 1939. A dockyard in Flushing, Netherlands, was the scene of frenetic activity. The keel was being laid for a new ship, and the workers were very proud of their efforts. Construction proceeded at a steady pace as the hull was built from the bottom up. Just over a year later, however, political events suddenly intervened. On May 10, 1940, the German army swept into the Netherlands. Four days later the badly outmatched Dutch army surrendered.

All work at the dockyard was halted indefinitely. But then the Germans demanded that the boats under construction in the Netherlands be completed for the German *Kriegsmarine*.

The German aggression failed to break the will of the Dutch. In her broadcasts from exile in London, Queen Wilhelmina was very strident in condemning any cooperation with the German occupiers. A thriving resistance movement quickly sprang up and it continued to operate effectively throughout the war.

Under this state of affairs, the Dutch shipyard workers had no intention of assisting the German war effort. Instead, they worked as slowly as they dared. When progress did not proceed slowly enough, the Dutch underground became involved. The semi-completed boat was sabotaged several times, delaying the work considerably.

The liberation of the Netherlands began



One of the busy docks in Genoa.



Genoa's harbor sparkles at night.



Genoa has one of the busiest harbors in the Mediterranean.

