

= American Palestine Line =

The American Palestine Line was a steamship company , formed in 1924 in the U.S. , for the purpose of providing direct passenger service from New York to Palestine and was reportedly the first steamship company owned and operated by Jews . The company negotiated to purchase three ocean liners from the United States Shipping Board , but it was only able to purchase one , SS President Arthur , a former North German Lloyd steamer that operated as Princess Alice before being seized by the United States during World War I. After refurbishing the liner , the company inaugurated service between New York and Palestine in March 1925 , when President Arthur sailed on her maiden voyage . A crowd of 15 @, @ 000 witnessed ceremonies that included songs , prayers , and speeches in English and Yiddish . The company claimed that President Arthur was the first ocean liner to fly the Zionist flag at sea and the first ocean liner ever to have female officers .

The line had labor difficulties and financial difficulties throughout its existence . On President Arthur ' s first trip in 1925 , rumors of a mutiny were reported in The New York Times , and several crew members got into an altercation with members of the Blackshirts , the Italian fascist paramilitary group , when the liner made an intermediary stop in Naples . On her second voyage , the ship 's master @-@ at @-@ arms was killed by a fellow crew member . Financial difficulties included unpaid bills and resultant court actions as well as accusations of fraud against company officers that were leveled in the press . In late 1925 the company was placed in the hands of a receiver ; President Arthur ? after a two @-@ alarm fire in her forward cargo hold ? ended up back in the hands of the United States Shipping Board (USSB) , and the company 's office furniture and fixtures were sold at auction in early 1926 .

= = Background = =

The newly formed American Palestine Line , reportedly the first ever steamship company owned and operated by Jews , began working to institute direct passenger service from New York to Palestine . To that end , the company began negotiations with the United States Shipping Board (USSB) to purchase three former German ocean liners , sister ships President Fillmore and President Arthur and the smaller Mount Clay . On October 9 , 1924 , the American Palestine Line 's president ? Jacob S. Strahl , a New York Supreme Court justice ? announced the purchase of President Arthur from the USSB , with plans to begin the Palestine service the following March . Strahl also publicly announced American Palestine 's intent to acquire President Fillmore at the same time ; plans for that acquisition and that of Mount Clay , however , never materialized .

= = The ship = =

SS President Arthur was formerly Kiautschou , a Barbarossa @-@ class ocean liner launched in September 1900 for the Hamburg America Line 's Far East passenger and mail service . When Hamburg America withdrew from the service , the liner was traded to North German Lloyd , and regularly used ? under the new name of Princess Alice ? on both North Atlantic and Far East passenger routes . The liner was interned in the U.S.-controlled Philippines at the outset of World War I and was seized upon the American entry to the conflict . The ship was used as a transport ship for both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army under the name Princess Matoika . After some post @-@ war use as a passenger liner and yet another name change ? this one in honor of the 21st U.S. President , Chester A. Arthur ? she was taken out of service when changes in U.S. laws severely curtailed the number of immigrants that could enter the country in the early 1920s . At the time of the purchase by American Palestine , the ship had been laid up in Baltimore since late 1923 .

News reports the following month fixed the purchase price of President Arthur at \$ 60 @, @ 000 cash , plus assurances that the liner would be reconditioned within six months . Announced plans for reconditioning included reducing passenger capacity to 675 and increasing the cargo capacity to 4 @, @ 000 long tons (4 @, @ 100 t) . Also on tap were swimming pools , a game room , a gymnasium , a lecture hall , a social hall , and a moving picture theater . The line had originally

planned to change the name of the liner to White Palace , but that was never brought about .

After undergoing reconditioning at Morse Dry Dock & Repair in Brooklyn , President Arthur was taken out for a 100 @-@ nautical @-@ mile (190 km) shakedown cruise on March 7 , 1925 . Steaming off the New Jersey coast , President Arthur , expected by American Palestine officials to top out at 16 knots (30 km / h) , reached a reported maximum cruising speed of 19 @.@ 7 knots (36 @.@ 5 km / h) , which company officials claimed would reduce her travel time to Palestine by two or three days . At the end of the shakedown , the liner was docked at the foot of West Houston Street in preparation for her maiden voyage five days later .

The acquisition of President Arthur by American Palestine inspired Jewish lyricist Solomon Small to pen the song " President Arthur 's Zion Ship " which contained these lines in its refrain :

President Arthur , sail
Blazing for my children a trail .
I have waited ages long
With a mother 's yearning strong .

= = Palestine service begins = =

On the morning of March 12 , 1925 , crowds started gathering at President Arthur ' s pier at 7 : 00 a.m. By the time the ceremonies ? broadcast by New York 's municipal radio station , WNYC ? opened with the singing of both " The Star @-@ Spangled Banner " and " Hatikvah " , the crowd had swelled to 15 @,@ 000 in number . The festivities included speeches and prayers from Orthodox Rabbi Morris S. Margolies ; David Yellin , Vice Mayor of Jerusalem , who addressed the crowd in Yiddish ; Rabbi David de Sola Pool ; and Rabbi Stephen S. Wise . Cantor Josef Rosenblatt sang to the crowd and a telegram from New York merchant Nathan Straus , unable to attend the event , was read aloud . American Palestine Line president Jacob S. Strahl , in his remarks , made the claim that the sailing of President Arthur marked the first appearance " in more than 2 @,@ 000 years of the flag of Judea on the high seas " .

The ship , with Stars of David painted on her funnels , pulled away from the dock at eight minutes before noon , nearly an hour later than her planned departure time , and headed to Haifa , with an intermediate stop in Naples . On board were some 400 passengers from all over the United States and Canada , most of whom were tourists wanting to see the Holy Land . Many of the passengers , including a contingent from the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg , were also sailing in order to attend the dedication of the Hebrew University at Mount Scopus by former British Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour . President Arthur also carried agricultural equipment and trucks to be used for farm development in Palestine . In addition , the liner featured Bernice P. Schmitt and Rebecca Adelman , who , according to contemporary news reports , were the first ever female officers on an ocean liner .

Herman Hirsch , a Jewish male from Chicago on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land , kept an account of President Arthur ' s maiden voyage . On Friday , March 13 , one day into the voyage , Hirsch reported that the torah was dedicated and a procession to songs and music accompanied a march over all parts of the ship . Afterwards , Rabbi Aaron Ashinsky of Pittsburgh , Pennsylvania , officiated at a service held in a chapel provided for the passengers .

Newspapers published radio dispatches emanating from President Arthur throughout her maiden voyage , thanks to a powerful new radio set installed aboard the liner . On March 14 the liner was able to avoid the worst of a gale that slowed Leviathan of the United States Lines , and on March 26 President Arthur was able to avoid a waterspout 50 nautical miles (93 km) east of Gibraltar . At Gibraltar , the local Jewish community chartered a ship to escort President Arthur through the Mediterranean . The ship docked at Naples on March 27 , four days later than her planned arrival there , and departed the same day .

The liner arrived at Haifa on March 31 , nearly a week late . Herman Hirsch reported that a passenger from Chicago , Jacob Drapekin , 72 , had died aboard the ship on March 24 . The man 's dying wish was to be buried in the Holy Land , and the crew of President Arthur helped fulfill his wishes . After arrival in Haifa , his flag @-@ draped coffin was placed on deck and services were

conducted in English and Hebrew by Rabbi Ashinsky before the body was taken ashore for interment . A sizable crowd , comprising delegations from Jerusalem , Jaffa , and Tel Aviv , greeted the arriving ship . Most of the passengers on President Arthur were hurried to Jerusalem for the Hebrew University dedication ceremony the next day .

President Arthur departed Haifa on April 4 for a ten @-@ day excursion in the Mediterranean , calling at Jaffa , Beirut , Alexandria , and Naples , among others , before sailing for the United States from Haifa on April 17 . While docked at Naples on April 23 , crewmen from President Arthur got into a confrontation with members of the Blackshirts , the Italian fascist paramilitary group . Five of the Blackshirts had broken noses and black eyes ; five American seamen were arrested and a further 15 Americans swam out to their steamer to avoid arrest . After calling at Halifax , the liner docked at Pier 86 in New York on March 8 , carrying among its cargo 75 @,@ 000 bags of onions from Alexandria , 16 @,@ 000 cases of lemons from Palermo , and two cases of Jaffa oranges for Nathan Straus . Only 500 well @-@ wishers greeted the ship , arriving as it did on the Jewish sabbath , but President Arthur was greeted by the largest police detail in many years because of rumors of a mutiny on board the ship . Sources are unclear as to what actually happened aboard the ship , but it is known that virtually the entire crew , including the captain , was replaced before the next voyage .

On May 12 President Arthur sailed on her second voyage to Palestine , counting Hemda Ben @-@ Yahuda , the widow of Hebrew linguist Eliezer Ben @-@ Yehuda , among her passengers . During the trip , an altercation between a Steward and the ship 's master @-@ at @-@ arms resulted in the death of the latter while the ship was in Naples . Though the steward was arrested by Italian authorities , he was acquitted of murder by the Assize Court at Naples . After a return to New York , President Arthur sailed for Haifa on July 19 for what would be her last voyage for American Palestine .

= = The demise of American Palestine = =

By this time , the company , perpetually undercapitalized by its own admission , faced mounting financial troubles . On July 10 , the company had to post an indemnity bond to avoid the impoundment of President Arthur for a disputed bill owed to Morse Dry Dock for the ship 's 1924 refit . The following month , President Arthur was used as collateral for \$ 100 @,@ 000 loan from a Bronx bank , but it was too little , too late . American Palestine Line was placed in receivership on September 11 by federal judge Thomas D. Thacher of the U.S. District Court after suit was brought by a creditor . Eight days later , President Arthur , docked at the foot of West 34th Street , experienced a two @-@ alarm fire in her forward cargo hold that brought out both land @-@ based firefighters and the New York City Fire Department fireboat James Duane . In December , the line was accused of fraud in some of its prior financial dealings , charges the company denied . By the time all the legal wrangling was finished , President Arthur was back in the hands of the USSB , and the furniture and fixtures of the American Palestine offices were sold at public auction by the company 's receiver in early March 1926 .