WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THE RETIREMENT OF STRAITS STEAMSHIP’S ‘SS KEDAH’?

The SS Kedah is one of the most beautiful vessels that sailed out of Singapore as her home port. She served as Lord Mountbatten’s HQ during his return to Singapore after the Japanese surrender. Showing her age, she was sold to the new nation of Israel, and embarked on a second career carrying Jewish refugees and immigrant to their ‘promised land’. The following very interesting article is from the website “ssMaritime.com”. The author of the piece is Mr Reuben Goossens, whom we thank for this detailed epilogue.

The ZIM Ships and their background

Straits Steamship Co Liner, SS Kedah (From the author’s private collection)

SS Kedah

ZIM’s first passenger ship, the SS Kedmah, entered service in 1947. She transported passengers and immigrants to the State of Israel, from Genoa and Marseilles and continued in service for ZIM until 1952.

Here we see SS Kedah with her upper hull portal’s open during hot weather conditions, whilst she was sailing in the tropics!
These were later sealed when she was sold to ZIM Lines.

The SS Kedmah had her beginnings back in 1926, when the Straits Steamship Company, being an associate of the famed Blue Funnel Line, decided to build a ship designed especially for the express tropical service, sailing between Singapore and Penang. Until then the company had operated various smaller vessels which were their main, if not their only connection, between the many small ports in the region. The specifications put down by the company were quite a challenge to marine architects and only three firms offered tenders for her construction. The contract to build her was placed with Vickers shipyards, of Barrow. She was launched by Lady Maxwell on July, 16, 1927, and named Kedah after the Malaysian province in which she was meant to operate. Her specifications were 2,499 gross tons.

SS Kedah had two passenger decks, three holds and hatchways and 6 steam-driven cranes and a double bottom that extended the entire length of the ship. She was powered by two single turbine steam engines, and with her twin screws this gave her a respectable speed of 18 knots. The Kedah commenced service in 1927 and she quickly became a popular ship in the region and was nicknamed the “Little Queen of Malacca Straits,” and there a special anchorage was marked on charts of Singapore as “Kedah’s anchorage.” Painted all white, with just four mahogany coloured lifeboats, she was an impressive looking small ship. Amidships she accommodated 80 first-class passengers, as well as up to 960 deck passengers.

War Time Duties

SS Kedah, armed auxiliary vessel number FY035

(Photograph courtesy of Mrs. Harman, and taken by Second officer Dick Harman)

In December 1939, SS Kedah was requisitioned by the Royal Navy as an armed auxiliary vessel number FY035. The Navy made various changes, which included the top section of the funnel being removed; also new taller masts were erected, as well as being armed with two 4-inch guns and one 3 inch. Anti-aircraft gun. Depth charge launchers were placed on the after deck. She served in the north of Borneo and was used as an evacuation ship, prior the fall of Singapore. One her last sailing out of Singapore she was under constant attack from the air, but remained undamaged, thanks to the brilliant seamanship of captain, J.L. Sinclair. However, with bombs falling close to her hull, the massive vibrations damaged her engines and she could only manage a speed of 7 knots. In Batavia, although in urgent need of overhaul, she was ordered to sail to Tjilatjap Indonesia, to take onboard
the staff of General Wavell, and some 400 refugees, and take them to Colombo Ceylon. But, she was once again attacked by air, after which her machinery failed completely. She was towed the rest of the way by H.M.S. Dragon. She arrived in Colombo on March 9, where she was fully refitted. Thereafter, she spent the next two years operating in the Bay of Bengal. But in 1945 she was chosen to be the headquarters for the General Staff during the invasion of Malaya. For this purpose she was suitably fitted out with an array of radio equipment. On September 5, 1945, "Kedah" was the first ships to re-enter Singapore, flying the flag of rear admiral J. A.V. Morse, and carrying the combined operations staff, senior officers of the British military and the chairman of the Singapore Harbour Board, all in all, a dramatic and historic moment.

On her way back to England, she remained in Malta for a while serving as an accommodation ship. In 1946 she returned to Barrow for a comprehensive repairs and a refit. The Straits Steamship Company had no further need for the old girl, having received a substantial compensation from the Navy.

**SS Kedmah - Israel's first official passenger liner**

The newly rebuilt SS Kedmah, the pride of the Nation of Israel

From the author’s private collection

Whilst still under repair after the war, she was sold, for £75,000 UK pounds, to Harris and Dixon of London, who were representing Palestinian interests, which was later disclosed as being the ZIM Palestine Navigation Company. After taking possession of the ship, she was taken to Antwerp for further refitting. She was renamed Kedmah, and with the refit completed her accommodations had been greatly enlarged. She was now listed as being 3,504 GRT.
On July 28, 1947, SS Kedmah arrived at Tel Aviv, with Captain Eliezer Aczel in command, as there were intense national emotions, considering there were enthusiastic anticipation for Israel’s first very own passenger liner’s arrival. All the newspapers headlines, as well as the speeches given by the leaders of the Jewish Community, testify to the great symbolic value attached to the SS Kedmah. She was called “the first Hebrew ship.” And though there were vessels owned by Palestinian Jews before her, there was no other ship owned by a national company with a national livery and National colours on her funnel that included stars of David on it, being an integral part of the Jewish struggle for the restoration of their independent state. In May 1948, the ZIM Palestine Navigation Company was renamed ZIM Israel Navigation Company.

Countless thousands of Jewish settlers and general passengers sailed from Marseilles and Genoa to Haifa. Jews were keen to go and settle in “Eretz Yisroel” – the “Land of Israel,” and she would return to the east with tourists. Other passengers would be students and pilgrims to the “Holy Land” heading off for pilgrimage tours, which were very popular! At times she also operated cruises.
Here we see a Mother and child topside of the Kedmah bound for Israel

(Photograph was sent in by a supporter — Photographer is unknown, please see photo notes at the bottom of the page!)

SS Kedmah was a very popular ship both with the public as with the heads of state. Israel's first president, Mr. Chaim Weizman, began a tradition of vacation cruises on board the flagship of then Israeli Merchant Marine. Her First Class accommodations were exceptionally pleasant and there were fine lounges and dining room, with spacious decks! The Tourist Class also was well looked
after, but there was a section that had larger accommodations suitable for families! Yet there was a lounge, smoking room and dining room and all Kosher of course, as per the Jewish custom!

**Captain Eliezer L. Aczel.**

I received an email recently from a Mr. Amir D. Aczel who provided me with some information regarding his late Father who was a well-known ZIM Lines Captain. I felt that his story was worthwhile including on these pages and thus his details are below. These have been sourced in part from his email and from what I have gained from Mr. Aczel’s personal webpage and I have combined as much of the story as possible.

“My Father was Captain Eliezer Ladislas Aczel and he was a captain throughout ZIM’s entire period of operation serving on their passenger fleet. He served as the first captain on the company’s first official passenger ship that commenced in service with ZIM in July 1947, being the 3,504 ton (GRT), **SS Kedmah** and later he served on both the 9,855 GRT SS Israel built in 1955, as well as the 1957 built 9,914 GRT SS Theodor Herzl. He was also the captain of the delightful 7,811 GRT, 1961 built, MS Moledet for some time.

![Captain Aczel and famous French-Italian songstress ‘Dalida’ on board his ship](Photograph provided by Amir D. Aczel)

During WW 2, Captain Aczel had done many heroic acts whilst he had been working with the Allies, for which he had won a good number of medals! But one of the worst things he had to do was he once successfully delivered a baby on board his ship, something he said he would never wish to do again! During his lifetime my Father was known simply as ‘**Captain Aczel**’ and his ships ploughed throughout the Mediterranean during the 1950s and 1960s many of these were by then mostly popular cruises, departing Haifa and sailing to Piraeus, Naples, Marseille and Barcelona. On some years Venice would be included in the itinerary. Then at other times the ships would sail to Rhodes, Monte Carlo as well as the Balearic Islands and other jewels around the Mediterranean!”
Thus it seems to be quite clear that there is no doubt that Captain Eliezer L. Aczel must have made Israeli maritime history in a good many ways, as well during the war years, but he loved being a Captain during peacetime and commanding a good number of fine ZIM Lines passenger ships!

She is seen just berthing during her latter years

**SS Kedah / Kedmah Specifications:**

- **Built at:** Vickers Shipbuilding Ltd, Barrow-in-Furness, UK in 1927 as the SS Kedah.
- **Launched:** July, 16, 1927 by Lady Maxwell.
- **Tonnage:** 2,499 GRT (Gross Registered Tons).
- **Length:** 100.6m - 330ft.
- **Breadth:** 15.24m - 50ft.
- **Draught:** 4.7m - 15.5ft.
- **Propulsion:** Parsons single-reduction steam turbines. 6,200 S.H.P.
- **Screws:** Twin.
- **Speed:** 18 knots.
- **Passengers:** Kedah had 80 First class passengers & up to 960 deck Passengers.
- **Renamed:** Kedmah
- **Owners:** Straits Steamship Company 1927 - 1947.
- **Kedem Israel Line Ltd (ZIM) - Harris and Dixon - 1947 - 1952.
- **Port of Registry:** London 1927 to 1948, Haifa in 1948 to 1952 and London 1952 to 1957.

**SS Kedmah’s Final days:**

In 1952, ZIM and Harris & Dickson decided to terminate their partnership and Harris & Dickson purchased the part of ZIM and on November 2, 1952 the ship SS Kedmah was once again transferred to the British flag once more. She was renamed Golden Isles and she operated on Mediterranean cruises.
Then in 1954 ZIM Israel chartered her for a number of voyages between Marseille and Haifa. During the first voyage, whilst sailing from Haifa to Marseille, she took part in the rescue operation of the French liner the SS Champollion that had ran aground and foundered close to Beirut. The crew of the ship saved 186 passengers. In 1955 the ship was laid up in Genoa, but the very next year in 1956 she was sold and scrapped in 1957 in England.

The SS Kedah, Kedmah, Golden Isles sailed operated for a good 30 years. During these years, her silhouette and photo appeared on two postal stamps. First in 1980 on the 1$ stamp of Singapore, which had been issued within a set of ships stamps, and second time in 1995 on a 4.40 shekel Israeli stamp issued on the occasion of 50th anniversary of ZIM Lines. In Haifa two models of her exist, one is located in the National Nautical Museum and the other in a small museum of ZIM’s company’s premises.

*Reuben Goossens.*