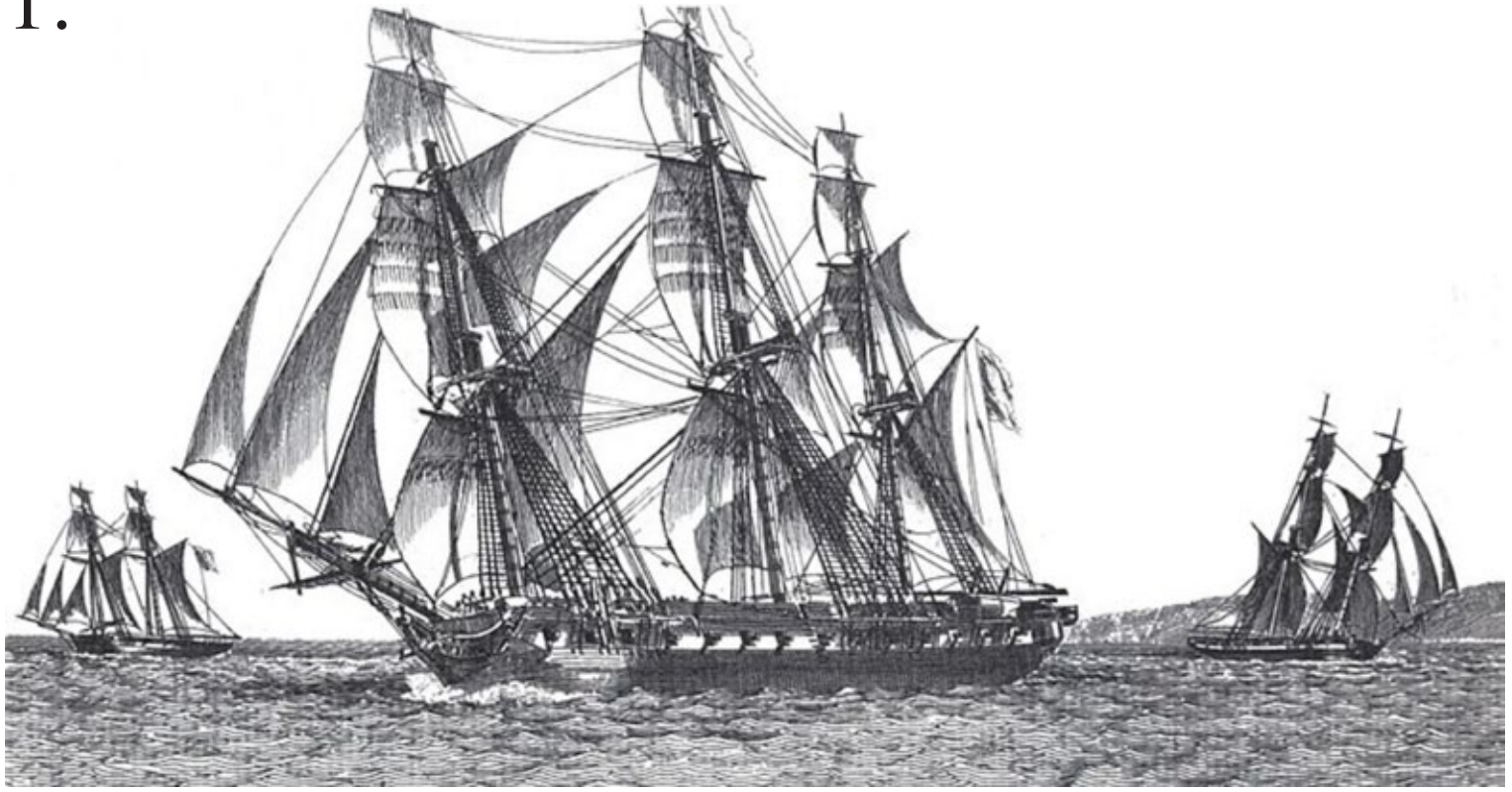


# 1.



*The frigate Méduse*

On 17 June 1816, a French naval convoy led by the frigate *Méduse*, under the command of Hugues Duroy de Chaumareys (a Royalist and Captain lacking real naval experience, appointed by king Louis XVIII) departed Rochefort harbor, accompanied by the storeship *Loire*, the brig *Argus* and the corvette *Écho*, to receive the British handover of the port of Saint-Louis in Senegal. The *Méduse* carried passengers, including the appointed French governor of Senegal, Colonel Julien-Désiré Schmaltz, and his wife Reine Schmaltz. The *Méduse* had 400 people on board, including 160 crew. She reached Madeira on 27 June.

Schmaltz then wanted to reach St. Louis as fast as possible, by the most direct route, but this would take the fleet dangerously close to the shore, where there were many sandbars and reefs. The *Méduse* was the fastest of the convoy and the captain quickly lost contact with the *Loire* and the *Argus*. The *Écho* kept pace and attempted to guide *Méduse*, but to no avail. The *Écho* then prudently moved further out to sea.

Chaumareys had decided to involve one of the passengers, Richefort, in the navigation of the frigate. Richefort was a philosopher and a member of the Philanthropic Society of Cape Verde, but had no qualification to guide ships. As she closed on the coast of Africa, the course of *Méduse* became dangerous. Richefort apparently mistook a large cloud bank on the horizon for Cape Blanco on the African coast, and so underestimated the proximity of the Bank of Arguin off the coast of Mauritania.

On 2 July 1816 *Méduse* ran into increasingly shallow water, both Chaumareys and Richefort ignoring signs such as white breakers and mud in the water. Eventually, Lieutenant Maudet took it upon himself to start taking soundings off the bow, and, measuring only 18 fathoms, warned his captain. Realizing the danger at last, Chaumareys ordered the ship brought up into the wind, but it was too late, and *Méduse* ran aground 50 kilometers off the coast. The accident occurred at a spring high tide, which made it difficult to re-float the frigate. The Captain refused to jettison the 14 three-ton cannons and so the ship settled into the bank.

Plans were proposed to use the ship's launches to ferry the passengers and crew to the shore, about 30 miles away, which would have taken two boat trips. Numerous ideas for lightening *Méduse* and immediately coming off the reef were proposed, in particular, that of building a raft to unload *Méduse*'s cargo. A raft was soon built; it was 20 meters in length and 7 meters in width, and was nicknamed "*la Machine*" by the crew. On 5 July, a gale developed and the *Méduse* showed signs of breaking up. Passengers and crew panicked and so the captain decided to evacuate the frigate immediately, with 146 men and one woman boarding the woefully unstable raft, towed by the boats of *Méduse*. The raft had few supplies and no means of steering or navigation. Much of its deck was under water. Seventeen men decided to stay on the *Méduse*, and the rest boarded the ship's longboats. The crew of the boats soon realized that towing the raft was impractical and began to fear being overwhelmed by the desperate survivors on the raft. It was decided to cut the ropes, leaving the raft and its occupants to their fate. The lifeboats, including the captain and Governor Schmaltz aboard, then sailed away to safety. Some landed immediately on the coast of Africa, most of the survivors making their way overland to Senegal though some died on the way.

On the raft, the situation deteriorated rapidly. Among the provisions were casks of wine instead of water. Fights broke out between the officers and passengers on one hand, and the sailors and soldiers on the other. On the first night adrift, 20 men were killed or committed suicide. Stormy weather threatened, and only the center of the raft was secure. Dozens died either in fighting to get to the center, or because they were washed overboard by the waves. Rations dwindled rapidly; by the fourth day there were only 67 left alive on the raft, and some resorted to cannibalism. On the eighth day, the fittest began throwing the weak and wounded overboard until only fifteen men remained, all of whom survived until their rescue on 17 July by *Argus*, which had accidentally encountered them.

## 2.



*A photo thought to be of the Struma*

*Struma* had been built as a luxury yacht but was 74 years old and in the 1930s had been relegated to carrying cattle on the River Danube under the Panamanian flag of convenience. The Mossad LeAliyah Bet intended to use her as a refugee ship, but shelved the plan after the German entry into Bulgaria. Her Greek owner Jean D. Pandelis instead contacted Revisionist Zionists in Romania. The New Zionist Organization and Betar Zionist youth movement began to make arrangements but an argument over the choice of passengers left the planning in the hands of Betar.

Apart from the crew and 60 Betar youth, there were over 700 passengers who had paid large fees to board the ship. The exact number is not certain, but a collation of six separate lists produced a total of 781 passengers and 10 crew. Passengers were told they would be sailing on a renovated boat with a short stop in Istanbul to collect their Palestinian immigration visas. Ion Antonescu's Romanian government approved of the voyage.

Romanian customs officers took many of the refugees' valuables and other possessions, along with food that they had brought with them. The passengers were not permitted to see the vessel before the day of the voyage. They found that she was a wreck with only two lifeboats. Below decks, *Struma* had dormitories with bunks for 40 to 120 people in each. The berths were bunks on which passengers were to sleep four abreast, with 60 cm width for each person.

On the day of her sailing *Struma*'s engine failed so a tug towed her out of the port of Constanța. The waters off Constanța were mined, so a Romanian vessel escorted her clear of the minefield. She then drifted overnight while her crew tried vainly to start her engine. She transmitted distress signals and on 13 December the Romanian tug returned. The tug's crew said they would not repair *Struma*'s engine unless they were paid. The refugees had no money after buying their tickets and leaving Romania, so they gave all their wedding rings to the tugboatmen, who then repaired the engine. *Struma* then got under way but by 15 December her engine had failed again so she was towed into Istanbul in Turkey.

There she remained at anchor while British diplomats and Turkish officials negotiated over the fate of the passengers. Because of Arab and Zionist unrest in Palestine, Britain was determined to apply the terms of the White Paper of 1939 to minimize Jewish immigration to Palestine. British diplomats urged the Turkish government of Refik Saydam to prevent *Struma* from continuing her voyage. Turkey refused to allow the passengers to disembark. While detained in Istanbul, *Struma* ran short of food. Soup was cooked twice a week and supper was typically an orange and some peanuts for each person. At night each child was issued a serving of milk.

After weeks of negotiation, the British agreed to honor the expired Palestinian visas possessed by a few passengers, who were allowed to continue to Palestine overland. With the help of influential friends a few others also managed to escape. One woman was admitted to an Istanbul hospital after miscarrying. On 12 February British officials agreed that children aged 11 to 16 on the ship would be given Palestinian visas, but a dispute occurred over their transportation to Palestine. The United Kingdom declined to send a ship, while Turkey refused to allow them to travel overland.

Negotiations between Turkey and Britain seemed to reach an *impasse*. On 23 February 1942 a small party of Turkish police tried to board the ship but the refugees would not let them aboard. Then a larger force of about 80 police came, surrounded *Struma* with motor boats, and after about half an hour of resistance got aboard the ship. The police detached *Struma*'s anchor and attached her to a tug, which towed her through the Bosphorus and out into the Black Sea. As she was towed along the Bosphorus, many passengers hung signs over the sides that read "SAVE US" in English and Hebrew, visible to those who lived on the banks of the strait. Despite weeks of work by Turkish engineers, the engine would not start. The Turkish authorities abandoned the ship in the Black Sea, about 10 miles north of the Bosphorus, where she drifted helplessly.

On the morning of 24 February there was a huge explosion and the ship sank. Many years later it was revealed that the ship had been torpedoed by the *Shchuka*-class Soviet submarine *Shch-213*.

*Struma* sank quickly and many people were trapped below decks and drowned. Many others aboard survived the sinking and clung to pieces of wreckage, but for hours no rescue came and all but one of them died from drowning or hypothermia. Of the estimated 791 people killed, more than 100 were children. *Struma*'s First Officer Lazar Dikof and a 19-year-old refugee called David Stoliar clung to a cabin door that was floating in the sea. The First Officer died overnight but Turks in a rowing boat rescued Stoliar the next day. He was the only survivor. Turkey held Stoliar in custody for many weeks but released him after Britain gave him papers to go to Palestine. He later reached Palestine, only to immigrate a few years later to the USA.

My grandfather, Shmuel Alter, who was a member of the Betar movement in Romania, was supposed to board the *Struma* at Constanța harbor but was late for her departure.

### 3.



*The 21 asylum seekers, detained at the border*

Eritrea's human rights record is one of the world's worst. Several human rights violations are committed by the government or on behalf of the government. Freedom of speech, press, assembly, and association are limited. Those that practice "unregistered" religions, or escape military duty which is obligatory between the ages of 16 to 55, are arrested and put into prison. Well known prisoners are usually held in underground cells and less known prisoners are usually put together in cargo containers or in very overcrowded prisons that are sometimes located underground, and suffer from extreme heat (during the day) and cold (during the night) conditions. In addition to the harsh imprisoning conditions, torture, murder, and vengeance against the prisoners' families are common treatments imposed by the state.

The registered, census-based religions are the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church (a monophysite Oriental Orthodox denomination), the Roman Catholic Church, Eritrean Lutheran Church, and Sunnite Islam. All other religions are persecuted, including other denominations of Islam, such as Shi'ism, and other denominations of Christianity, such as any of the myriad Protestant denominations. All denominations of Christianity enjoyed freedom of worship until 2002 when the government outlawed worship and assembly outside the 'registered' denominations. All groups who worship secretly in a house or any other unregistered place of assembly are arrested and imprisoned without charge or trial. Religious prisoners are often tortured in Eritrea. Freedom of worship is one of

the top reasons thousands of Eritreans flee the country. There are thousands of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia and the Sudan seeking asylum in Europe or another region of the West. Eritrea is a one-party state in which national legislative elections have been repeatedly postponed.

In its 2010 Press Freedom Index, Reporters Without Borders classified the media environment in Eritrea at 178 out of 178, the lowest possible rating and below that of totalitarian North Korea at 177. According to the BBC, “Eritrea is the only African country to have no privately owned news media”, and Reporters Without Borders said of the public media, “[they] do nothing but relay the regime’s belligerent and ultra-nationalist discourse. ... Not a single [foreign correspondent] now lives in Asmara.” The state-owned news agency censors news about external events. Independent media have been banned since 2001.

In recent years many African refugees have tried to make the long dangerous route from African countries, through Egypt, to the state of Israel. Most of them are Sudanese escaping the genocide taking place in Sudan, and another large group are Eritreans escaping prosecution, imprisonment and torture in their country of origin. Their way is full of perils, which except for the ones implied by their country’s authorities, include the en route chance of being killed, raped, organ-harvested and blackmailed by armed desert militias and individuals, as well as by Egyptian soldiers who have had explicit orders to execute African refugees on the spot.

On 30 Aug 2012, a group of Eritrean refugees made it to the Israeli-Egyptian border, on the southern Israeli border. However, they were not able to cross the fence that was recently erected along the border by the state of Israel, in order to stop African refugees from “infiltrating” into the country. Nevertheless, this group of refugees were de facto inside Israel’s territory, since the fence at that point had been built inside the Israeli territory. Israeli soldiers guarding the border were dispatched to the scene, were they kept the refugees, who were at that point in a state of utter exhaustion, from getting beyond the fence.

As soon as this situation became public, the “Anu Plitim” (We Refugees) NGO operating in Tel Aviv appealed to the Supreme Court with an urgent request to let the asylum seekers into the state, give them needed humanitarian aid, and inquire about their requests for political asylum. It’s worth noting, that for years the state of Israel’s line of treatment with African refugees was sending them to prison without trial, while disregarding their asylum requests. In this case, they wouldn’t let them in at all.

The discussion in the supreme court was scheduled for the following Sunday, but as the delegates assembled in the court room, it was announced that the discussion would not take place since the asylum seekers are no longer at the border, that the two women and the minor were brought into Israel, and that the remaining 18 male adults had willingly left the scene and returned to Egypt.

Following the news, the two members of Anu Plitim went to the southern prison camp of Saharonim to interview and check on the three refugees who were brought into Israel. From their testimony they learned, that what in fact happened was that the two women and one minor were let across the border, while the remaining 18 asylum seekers, unable to resist being in a state of incredible exhaustion after walking across hundreds of kilometers in the desert and then waiting for a week with some water and stale bread miserly provided by the soldiers, were dragged by the Israeli soldiers over to the Egyptian side, and left there for their fates in the middle of nowhere.

