

Photographs by Bryan Wharton, graphics by John Grimwade

# The Plumbat Affair—or how to hijack a holocaust

Tony Geraghty unravels the case of the ship that went missing with uranium aboard

ON A SOMNOLENT Saturday afternoon in Antwerp harbour Albert Heinen, local representative of Belgium's biggest removal firm, went aboard a small motor vessel for a glass of Scotch in the skipper's cabin.

The skipper, an assured young man aged about 25, was British. The ship, fresh as paint after dry-dock refit, was newly transferred from the German shipping register and now flew the Liberian flag.

The cargo, for which Heinen's firm had been responsible during its train journey across Belgium, consisted of 560 drums each marked with the word Plumbat, a trade name for uranium. After only two hours work it was now safely stowed on board, bound for Italy.

A few hours later, in the early hours of November 17, 1968, the ship moved out of Antwerp as gently as a pick-pocket easing his way out of a crowd. Only now, more than eight years later, has Heinen learned that he had unwittingly witnessed the beginning of the biggest uranium loss in history; enough raw material in the hands of a scientific team with the right equipment to make about 30 nuclear bombs.

## The great cover-up

In the meantime, the disappearance had become the subject of a cover-up of Watergate proportions by security forces responsible for its investigation. Only when a free-lance campaigner for tighter supervision of fissionable material, Paul Leventhal, made a public speech a week or so ago revealing the outlines of what had happened was it officially admitted that:

- Two European companies arranged a transfer of uranium which was outside existing control regulations;

- When the disappearance of an entire cargo of 200 tons of uranium was discovered, Euratom, the intergovernmental agency responsible, did not have the resources to discover where it had gone;

- Inquiries by the security services of West Germany, Belgium, Italy and the US were equally ineffective;

- The security services' joint report, resulting from Euratom's request for an investigation, had been withheld from Euratom itself.

The Sunday Times has established, furthermore, that for months after the uranium vanished the ship continued to make routine trips between Antwerp and the Mediterranean under the noses of police forces which now assert that the vessel "vanished" for a year and was finally discovered with a completely new crew in Morocco.

This weekend, as the European nuclear industry congratulates itself on President Carter's promise to make US plutonium—refined uranium—more lib-

erally available to other western nations, ugly questions raised about the missing cargo, already dubbed the Plumbat Affair, are being tabled for answer later this week in the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

THE URANIUM was originally brought as crude ore from Shaba province, Zaire, to Europe by the respected Belgian company, Societe General des Minerais. Towards the end of 1967 the company received an order from a small West German firm, Asmara Chemie, of Wiesbaden, for 200 tons of natural uranium. According to Euratom's former director of preventive medicine, Enrico Jacchia last week, Asmara ("which occupied a little building in a forest") made no secret of the fact that it was acting on behalf of a Casablanca chemical company. The contract was signed on March 29, 1968, after the Moroccan firm had promised not to re-export the material.

The Belgian firm had to point out to Asmara that such a deal, involving the export of nuclear material outside European control, would require a special EEC permit. But if the deal remained within the Euratom family, there would be no problem: under article 75 of the relevant treaty, contracts to move uranium from one company to another for enrichment or refinement, and then back again to the source company, did not require formal approval, only that the watchdog organisation should be kept informed.

Asmara, the German firm which initiated the deal, adopted this approach. It agreed to send the 200 tons it was to buy from the Belgians to an Italian firm, by sea, for reprocessing.

According to Jacchia, Euratom was told that the uranium would be shipped to Milan via Genoa, to be "treated" before being sent back to Asmara in Germany. In those circumstances, the EEC was obliged to issue an export licence and release the cargo to international waters, beyond its jurisdiction.

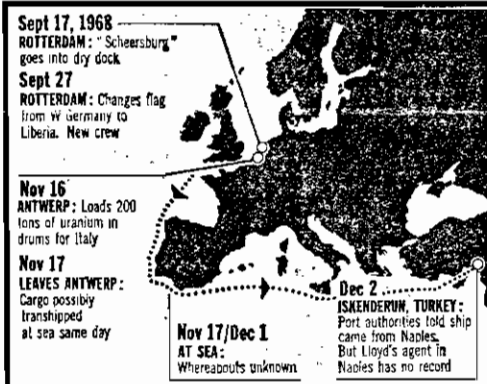
THE ITALIAN firm involved in this arrangement is still in business. It is Saica (Societa Anonima Italiana Colori e Affini) of Milan, a modest paint company. Last week when we interviewed Saica's managing director, Dr Francesco Sertoreo said that he has never discovered what he was expected to do with the 200 tons of uranium had it ever reached him because the instructions were with the cargo.

"We were on excellent terms with Asmara which was our representative in Germany," he explained. "Asmara asked if we could do a job for them. We were told that 200 tons of uranium were to be mixed with other products. Once finished, the mixture was to be reshipped through Genoa to Asmara. Asked if it was normal trade

● Additional material from George Armstrong, Rome; Henry Brandon, Washington; Dalbert Hallenstein, Milan; Peter Kenyon, Brussels; Eric Marsden, Jerusalem; David May, London; Mario Modiano, Athens; Peter Pringle, New York; Peter Rodgers, Salzburg and Antony Terry, Paris.



The Scheersberg (now the Kerkyra) last week in Trieste



## When the uranium went missing: the lost days

practice to accept such an order without knowing the products to be "mixed", Sertoreo replied that it was perfectly normal.

Did his firm have experience in mixing uranium with other products? No, said Sertoreo. In fact, his firm had never previously attempted to blend uranium. Yet despite such inexperience he was satisfied that Saica could have done the job.

## The cargo vanished

Interviewed a third time by The Sunday Times, Dr Sertoreo said that as he recalled about 15 days before they were expecting the arrival of the uranium his firm was notified by Asmara that Asmara—the German supplier—had decided to let a better-equipped, more specialised company handle the uranium.

According to Sertoreo Asmara did recompense Saica but he insists that the figure—£12,500—was to pay for a uranium store.

What is certain is that the physical movement of the uranium to international waters beyond Euratom's jurisdiction was not the only limit to its control. According to the current

EEC regulations the Italian firm had at least three months from the date the cargo left Belgium before it was obliged to confirm that the uranium had arrived. In fact, the EEC seems to have done its best to keep an eye on what was happening for on January 17, 1969, two months after the uranium left Antwerp, Euratom asked Saica if all was in order.

Eventually Euratom sent its own inspectors to the Milan plant only to confirm growing fears that the cargo had vanished. Saica told the inspectors, and repeated to The Sunday Times last week, that so far as it was concerned the whole affair was a mystery. Saica's managing director, Dr Sertoreo, claims he knew neither the name of the ship on which the uranium was travelling nor even whether it was to come overland by lorry.

THE GERMAN firm which inaugurated the deal, Asmara Chemie, was dissolved by its directors in 1975 and replaced by Scharf Chemie. The only member of the original Asmara team still in the Scharf organisation, Wilhelm Bargon, was not available for comment last week. What was more, said one of his colleagues, "if Bargon returns he will be unable to say anything apart from the fact that he had nothing to do with it."

The lack of knowledge of all those concerned with the deal baffled not only Euratom's investigators but also those of the security services. After several months work in 1969, Euratom had to admit to its member nations, "We cannot investigate further this question with the means and methods available to us but which are available to the security services of the various states." Euratom's own inquiry was formally closed in June, 1970.

exchanged for cash in Hamburg. Yarival handed over £157,000 in D-marks.

A number of curious things now began happening, most of them involving ambiguities about the identities of people as well as the ship itself. At Lloyd's of London, the ownership was transferred to Yarival's company, Biscayne, and the Scheersberg given a new name, the Scheersberg A. But this is not the name by which her former German owners knew her under Biscayne's ownership. Binder is certain that Yarival renamed the vessel the "Biscayne Trader". According to Lloyd's there is not and never has been a vessel of that name registered with it.

Lloyd's record of the movements of the Scheersberg A—the name by which the Scheersberg was re-registered officially—is clear and is based upon reports made by the London agency's own, independent observers. These reports indicate that the ship made a "shake-down" voyage from Emden on October 8 to Naples and Casablanca and back to Rotterdam. The only hitch in that apparently routine progress is after November 6 when, on departure from a French port, the master gave as his destination London. She never arrived there and her exact whereabouts are a mystery until departing from Rotterdam on November 15.

The mystery which the combined security services of four western nations have apparently failed to solve is what happened during the next voyage, the one which began with the cargo of uranium at Antwerp on November 17. On this, even the Lloyd's record is not entirely clear.

The Scheersberg A is recorded by Lloyd's as arriving at Iskenderun, Turkey, on December 1, 15 days after sailing from Antwerp on a voyage which Euratom officials had supposed was destined for Genoa. Iskenderun is about 280 miles from the Israeli port of Haifa and a comfortable day's sailing for the Scheersberg A.

Pressed by The Sunday Times last week to check the original agent's report from Iskenderun, Lloyd's was surprised to discover that on arrival in the Turkish port, the vessel had announced its last port of call as Naples. Lloyd's regards it as possible that the Naples agent did not record the Scheersberg A's landfall there, but not very likely. Where exactly the Scheersberg A was during that time is, of course, the question Euratom would like to answer.

From Iskenderun, the ship sailed west to the Turkish port of Mersin, to Palermo, to Ceuta in North Africa and to Denmark for Boxing Day. She arrived back at Rotterdam by way of Svendborg, Denmark, on January 5 and put to sea again for another trip to the eastern Mediterranean three days later. That voyage included a venture into the Romanian Black Sea port of Galatz.

According to EEC officials it was the American intelligence service which reached the droll conclusion that following the November 17 voyage from Antwerp, the Scheersberg A "disappeared" for a year and was finally spotted in Morocco with a "new" Liberian flag and crew. In fact, during the period when the investigation into the missing uranium was at its peak—the spring and summer of 1969—the ship was a regular visitor to Antwerp. She was there four separate times which should have given the security authorities ample opportunity to interrogate the crew.

IT IS A popular theory, shared by former Euratom officials, that the uranium went to Israel. For a start, the Israelis have the panache for such a coup, as the Entebbe Raid and the spiriting out of Cherbourg harbour of embargoed Israeli gunboats in 1969 demonstrate. The Israelis also have the highly sophisticated technology required to enrich uranium for military purposes.

Even more to the point, the uranium vanished at a time when Israel faced severe problems caused by the turnabout of French mid-eastern policy after the 1967 Six Day War. Until then France had helped set up Israel's natural uranium reactor at Dimona in the Negev.

The states immediately concerned, whose security services took on the inquiry in the spring of 1969, were West Germany, Belgium and Italy. Under international treaty Euratom also had to tell the US Government.

According to the former Euratom official, Enrico Jacchia, it was clear by 1972 that this inquiry also was "disappearing into the sand." The international secret service investigation, code-named Plumbat after the name on the missing 560 drums of uranium, appears to have failed. What is more serious is that whatever was achieved by this inquiry was never revealed.

The official EEC spokesman, Renato Ruggiero, asked last week whether there had been pressure from the US administration to suppress knowledge of the incident, declined to comment.

IF THE CARGO vanished rapidly and without trace, the ship — the only other tangible evidence of the great uranium disappearance—did not. Last week it was loading a cargo of cement in Trieste, continuing an unbroken career of tramping between Europe and the Mediterranean. It is now called the Krykyra and its ownership has changed more than once since Albert Heinen watched the uranium go aboard in November, 1968.

Until a month before that voyage the vessel flew the West German flag, and was owned by August Bolten of Hamburg. On September 27, 1968, it was sold to a Liberian company, Biscayne Traders Shipping Corporation.

Dr Juergen-Adolf Binder, a junior partner in the German firm, told us last week:

"We were introduced to a Levantine gentleman calling himself 'Yarisal.' He was described as a Greek or Turkish citizen living in Italy, and although non-resident in Germany, we did not need to take up any references because the sale was cash on the nail."

After brief negotiations with Yarisal, it was agreed that the ship would go into dry dock on its arrival in Rotterdam on September 17. Ten days later when the overhaul was completed, the ship's papers were

## Key to nuclear blackmail

It would have been possible to trans-ship the uranium from the Scheersberg A at sea, using the ship's own derricks, as the former Euratom official Enrico Jacchia hinted last week. Alternatively, the Scheersberg A could have put into Haifa on its way to Turkey, instead of Naples.

But would the Israelis have risked involvement of a Moroccan company as the first step in acquiring the uranium? Would they have employed a Turk as their broker?

It is possibly with these factors in mind that the Euratom commissioner in charge at the time, Wilhelm Haferkamp, will not acknowledge that there is conclusive proof of Israeli involvement.

Failing such proof, it is at least equally plausible, given the regular voyages made by the Scheersberg to such Islamic ports as Casablanca and Iskenderun, that the ultimate recipients were Arabs. The Israeli Government, after all, could have acquired 200 tons of uranium legitimately at the time on the open market. The only military advantage from a clandestine operation would have been a secret stockpile.

The wilder spirits of the Palestinian liberation movement would have found it much more difficult to buy uranium, and might, naively, have believed that uranium alone would give them the key to nuclear blackmail. If so, they appear to have burdened themselves with a cannon ball and no gun from which to shoot it.

However, the point that Paul Leventhal sought to make when he made his belated revelation has been rammed home in dramatic fashion—much tighter control was, and is, needed over all movements of nuclear material. In the meantime, the ineffable Dr Sertoreo, put at last to rest: "I do hope that the uranium hasn't got into the wrong hands."