

The Ship that Leads to Safety

By Lucia Ochsendorf

We sat on the bank, shivering as we watched other refugees cross the ice and continue their trek down the narrow strip of land between the lagoon and the Baltic Sea. Heavy snow fell. None of us minded the freezing weather. Everyone was desperate to board the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, a ship that would evacuate German civilian refugees from East Prussia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Estonia and military personnel from Gotenhafen as the Red Army advanced. We were Lithuanian refugees; a mother and her two children.

My younger sister, Diana, leaned on our *mama*'s shoulder. She was only seven years old. My *mama* tousled my overgrown hair affectionately and smiled at me: "Everything will be alright, Gintaras", she promised. I was 9 years old. Our *tévas* was killed by the Soviets in 1940, 5 years ago. I was old enough to remember him. I remember how, before going to bed, he used to read me books about great adventures, such as *Around the World in 80 Days*. I remember how, when he laughed, it had the ripple effect of spreading to everyone else in the room. I also remember the last time I ever saw my *tévas* when he gave me my amber ring. It was my only tie to him. My sister, on the other hand, was too young to remember him at all.

Mama, Diana, and I walked to Gotenhafen and arrived at dawn. There were *so* many other desperate people. At the harbour, things were chaotic. Nazi Party officials, local leaders, and their families would have priority passage on the departing ships. Officers and wounded soldiers would also be granted passage. After the priority travellers and military personnel were loaded, the Germans would choose refugees. Women and children would be allowed first. We walked through the town of Gotenhafen and found a safe place to rest. In a matter of hours the crowds had doubled in the town of Gotenhafen. We left at dusk and walked to the port. A sailor directed us towards registration.

We approached the registration area near the water. Lines of applicants snaked in endless turns. In the distance, we saw a group of party officials with their wives. These were the privileged passengers who would have priority boarding with the officers and the wounded. They stood in one line. The remaining lines were full of weary refugees and families like us. *Mama*, sister, and I waited in line for a long time. When we arrived at the counter, we showed our papers to the registration officers.

Once we got our passes, we headed to the ship we were assigned to; the *Wilhelm Gustloff*. It was headed to Kiel, a city at the northern tip of Germany. Two lighthouses stood guard at the mouth of the harbour, however they were not lit up, no reason to alert the Russian planes. The *Gustloff* was the most magnificent and grand ship in the harbour. Her build was clearly that of a leisure cruise ship. How lucky were we to be on such a large ship. I loved the bulky *Gustloff* with its thick steel walls and multiple levels. A sailor told me that the cruiser was only eight years old, but hadn't sailed in 4 years. Once we left Gotenhafen,

the voyage to Kiel would only take 48 hours. We would then board a train and reunite with our uncle, *tėvas*'s brother.

We went through inspection where they examined everyone's luggage and watched the flow of passengers approach the front of the line. Most of the discussions were about items too large to take on board: antiques, furniture, expensive carpets... People cried when their large items were refused. Not that we had anything of that sort, of course. Soldiers checked our passes and our papers and instructed us to board and report to a desk on D deck. Sister's hand trembled in mine as we walked. Mother told us that the *Wilhelm Gustloff* was a KdF ship. Apparently, it was a national German organization that was supposed to make leisure activities available for the masses, regardless of social class. It stood for "Strength through Joy" (*Kraft durch Freude*).

We were to sleep on mattress pads in a room that, from what I could tell, was used as a music room. My sister fell asleep quickly. Her cheeks were red, burned from the cold and the wind. Mine were, too. I watched her breathe in and out, until my mind drifted away into the blissful oblivion of sleep. In the morning, *mama* was gone. She returned moments later with a filled canteen, pea soup, and a large chunk of bread. I hadn't realized how hungry I was until I tore off a piece and put it in my dry mouth. I took a sip from the canteen. *Mama* pulled me close.

"I love you."

"I love you too", I said.

I thought of our warm kitchen at home in Kaunas, the smell of my mother's wonderful cooking, and my *tėvas*'s laughter echoing throughout the house. So much had changed since we left Lithuania.

Supposedly, we were to depart in any minute. The ship was *very* overcrowded. How many thousands of people had they boarded? Suddenly, the air horn sounded. We were finally departing! I squeezed Diana's hand. Soon, we would be safe and free. I glanced through a window. The scene was sickening. I realized how lucky we were and I suddenly felt bad for feeling excited. Tens of thousands of refugees were left behind on the dock, desperately screaming and begging. The *Gustloff* had been their only hope. It was ours too, but we had made it.

My sister was very seasick and it was too cold and windy to take air on the top deck. She wasn't the only one, though. I saw a few other people vomit and turned away. I glanced at the clock hanging on the wall. It read 9:13.

BANG!

I slid against the wall. *Mama* and sister were thrown to the floor.

What was happening?

Pitch-black. I stumbled to help them up.

BANG!

Our bodies slammed into each other.

Alarm bells.

Glass breaking.

Dim emergency lights.

My sister stood, not knowing what to do. I sprang into action, putting on my coat and my boots.

“Stay calm”, *mama* reassured us.

A sailor came and instructed everyone to put on life vests. The corridor was jammed with passengers.

“Torpedoes! A Russian sub”, someone shouted.

I climbed up the stairs. The boat tilted farther. We were sinking. Announcements finally came through the speakers.

“Don’t panic. Advance calmly to the top deck.”

The surge of the crowd pushed us forward. We held on tight to *mama*. The hallway was already flooded.

“We’re going to die!” someone cried. Further panic spread. All of a sudden I realized that *mama* and Diana were missing. I tried to be brave and continued to climb. I hoped to meet them outside. I finally made it to the top deck. The wind was merciless. Snow whipped against my cheeks. The deck was covered in ice. Sailors struggled to get the lifeboats ready.

But I wasn’t looking for a lifeboat.

I was looking for *mama*.

It was too slippery so I decided to crawl. I heard a woman frantically yell, “Gintaras, please!” It was my *mama*. I crawled over to them. We held onto each other. Hordes of people emerged onto the icy deck. It occurred to me that thousands were trapped on the lower decks. The few remaining boats were filling fast. Fortunately, we were able to get in a lifeboat that lowered into the black water. A child screamed for his father. Huge waves battered and tossed us.

“Please”, begged a young girl. “I’m freezing”.

“We’ll capsize”, argued the people around me.

I held out my hands and pulled her onto the boat.

“Thank you”, she told me.

“You had no right!”, they yelled at me.

“Shut up!” Diana replied.

The tail of the ship was all that remained sticking out of the water. Thousands of lifeless bodies floated around us. We were forced to witness their deaths. Thousands of desperate people screaming and flailing in the water. They would die of hypothermia.

“What is going to happen now?” asked Diana. Mother pulled us tight.

“We will finally have safety and freedom”, she said as she kissed our cheeks.