

Wilhelm Gustloff Museum – Survivor Account

Horst Voit

On May 20, 2005 at his home in “cottage country” Ontario, he provided a glimpse into a youth he says was stolen by Hitler and his cronies – a youth that happened to include survival of the greatest maritime disaster in history. Privileged and present to hear his fantastic story were filmmaker Marcus Kolga from Realworld Pictures and David Krawczyk from wilhelmgustloff.com.



When we arrived, we were treated to a brief tour of his beautiful lakefront property and home (most of it built by Horst himself). After meeting his wonderfully hospitable (and very patient!) wife Grace, we sat down by the fireplace in the den and listened carefully as the emotional survivor told his story. The picture is of Horst around the time of the disaster.

In the future, you will be able to learn even more about Horst’s story. Marcus Kolga is currently in early production of a unique documentary film dedicated to the story of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*. It will be like no other film ever produced and is sure to raise the profile of this important historical event. Needless to say, Horst’s story will be an important element in the documentary. This survivor is no stranger when it comes to contributing his perspective on the tragedy – for he has previously appeared in numerous books, newspapers, radio, and television programs on the subject. There is even a reference to him in *Crabwalk (Im Krebsgang)* by Gunter Grass.

It is January 1945 and Horst is a mischievous 10 year old boy in Elbing – present day Elblag, Poland. Residents desperately wait for official permission to flee from the Russians. Finally, with a knock on the door by the Hitler Youth, the order is given to head west and away from the Red Army advance into East Prussia. With collapse of Nazi Germany inevitable, the Voit family had previously made a pact to regroup near Frankfurt as the war was coming to its bitter end. Meta Voit (also pictured) and her son Horst leave behind Elbing forever, making their way to the Bay of Danzig by small boat and by foot. Before he leaves however, Horst steals a small jackknife from his uncle’s belongings stored in his bedroom – an object that in the near future will prove to become useful under the most catastrophic of circumstances.



Eventually arriving in Gotenhafen, Horst and his mother are one of the first to board the *Gustloff*. They are issued passes earlier and less-problematically than many others – mostly because they are a mother and child (men, adults, larger families have much more difficulty). In fact, Meta and Horst make it onto the official passenger list – one that would unofficially grow more than double as panic mounts closer to departure. Horst remembers a relatively orderly boarding as they take up residence in the *Gustloff* a couple of days before departure. Of course, to a 10 year old boy, he admits that it all seemed like some sort of terrific adventure.

Once on board, Horst recalls initially being placed in a large hall somewhere on the ship. Eventually, he and his mother with her friend and daughter are relocated to a cabin in the upper decks on the port side at the stern of the ship. He clearly remembers leaving Gotenhafen, seeing the other former KdF cruise ships turned refugee ships at their piers and other sights (particularly the two lighthouses at the mouth of the harbor). He recalls the panic increasing before departure as small boats desperately jockey for a position beside the *Gustloff* to transfer more desperate refugees.

Like any young boy on a big adventure, excitement catches up to Horst and he is eventually lulled to sleep in the cabin once the *Gustloff* has left Gotenhafen well behind it. Like his mother and many others on board, initial feelings of being “safe” set in – feelings that will soon vociferously vanish.

While the young boy soundly sleeps. Captain Marinesko of the Soviet submarine S-13 fires his salvo of torpedoes soon after 9pm. Deep in sleep, Woit does not recall hearing the first impact. Although it most certainly causes him to stir. He hears and feels the second and third impacts that seal the fate of the former KdF cruise liner turned escape ship. Almost immediately, the ship begins to list to the port side.

Horst and his mother hurriedly make their way onto the decks and down a gangway toward the lifeboats. Thankfully, due to their location on the ship and a fair amount of luck, they are spared the treacherous below-deck pandemonium and are selected to get on a lifeboat relatively quickly. Horst sees the SOS flares being shot from astern into the cold night sky (an extraordinary vivid memory he still sees today just like it was over 60 years ago).

Horst’s “misdeed” of stealing his uncle’s jackknife back in Elbing will soon be forgiven. In fact, it is this very wayward deed that may have saved his life – and others in the lifeboat. After the boat is lowered into the water, someone shouts that the ropes are frozen. If they are not cut loose, the lifeboat could be pulled down into the depths with the stricken liner. The young Woit boy produces his knife, hands it over to a man who eventually cuts the frozen thick ropes, setting the lifeboat free.

As the lifeboat pulls away from the *Gustloff*, Horst’s eyes lock in on his former ship of adventure as it slips below the waterline. As an ironic last gasp, he sees all the lights in the ship come on in a blaze before it heads down to its watery grave.

Horst is one of the first to be rescued in the *Gustloff* disaster. When the waves cooperate and with careful timing, he is snagged by an officer aboard the sole *Gustloff* escort turned rescue vessel – Torpedoboat *Löwe*. He is taken down to the engine room where the warmth is a considerable contrast to the frigid temperatures endured in the lifeboat. A ship's mate looks after him – managing to acquire a marmalade sandwich for Horst to eat.

Becoming separated from Horst worries Meta. She is not pulled into the *Löwe* until well after her son Horst has been on board. She frantically searched for him, including a harrowing incident where she checks under a blanket near the front of the *Löwe* – a blanket covering the bodies of children who did not make it. Finally, mother and son are reunited in an emotional embrace. The *Löwe* drops the survivors in Kolberg (today Kolobrzeg).

After the disaster, Horst and his mother spend one year in Schwerin, East Germany – ironically the birthplace and burial place of former Swiss Nazi leader Wilhelm Gustloff. After experiencing further unspeakable challenges under Soviet rule, they escape to the west and keep their promise to the rest of the family to reunite near Frankfurt. Remarkably, Horst says that none of his family members who made that promise were killed. Even though it took many months and years, all somehow made their way to the place they agreed upon – while the last vestiges of the Nazi empire crumbled while an iron grip of Soviet rule filled the void.

Horst has been in Canada since 1953. After working for the Eaton's retail chain for many years, he retired north of Toronto, Ontario with his wife Grace.



Above: Horst points out key facts about the night of the disaster on original *Wilhelm Gustloff* artwork.