

Wilhelm Gustloff Museum – Survivor Account

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My birth and hometown Königsberg, East Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia) was surrounded with Russian troops when our parents wanted my oldest sister and me to go to my married sister in Berlin.

We tried first over land as three Russian tanks stopped us. We went back and found our parents still home. The Nazis would have killed my father for deserting his own business. Stores downtown and furniture factories behind our house and garden had been watched from both sides.

My father opened our house to eight German soldiers to stay in our home until their truck was repaired. It was January 26, 1945 when one soldier offered to have us go with them to Pillau (now Baltiysk, Russia), our Baltic Sea harbor – they had the order to go west. Shortly before arriving at the harbor was an SS control stop. We huddled under the benches with the soldier's legs and gear covering us. Sure enough, they came to the back of the truck and checked with their flashlights.

In Pillau, it took us a while to find a boat that would take us – the *Gen West*. It was the tugboat *Elbing IV* – that had already been under Russian fire and its waterlines damaged that now took the big merchant marine ship in tow, *Gen West*. The tugboat took water at high sea. So they had to go to the next harbor, Gotenhafen (now Gdynia, Poland).

The captain announced that the big ship on the other quay would take us on board as it was ready to leave the harbor. It was the *Wilhelm Gustloff* – we did not know that then. My sister looked at the ship and said, “a nice ship to be torpedoed, but better to drown than fall into Russian hands.” So we went on.

They let the ramp down for us to go aboard. We got registered. The soldiers that ran the ship had to give us their life vests. Then we were told to go to the dining room – to get our rationing of bread and find ourselves a place to rest. We were shocked as the dining room was full of people laying like sardines. The other rooms, field hospitals – mothers with children born that morning or before, etc. We went back to the hallway next to the washroom. Everything was so nice and clean. So we took our life vests as mattresses and our fur coats as a blanket.

It was not long as the first detonation exploded. The air got dusty. We knew what happened. I grabbed my coat, put it on, then the life vest. We were next to the stairs, my legs gave way. I crawled like a dog up the stairs. People started to step on me and over me.

At the door on the Promenade Deck, I got fresh air and could stand up. My sister and our young aunt, 3 months pregnant, were standing next to one lifeboat on the railing

and watched as they hammered the boats loose from the mothership. Everything was icy. We were told that these lifeboats were only for mothers and children.

The chaos started. The ship started to lay to the other side. We had to hold ourselves onto the railing. Shots got fired. The SOS flares went to the sky. My sister and aunt got cold. Instead of grabbing their fur coats, they grabbed their life vests first. I told my sister we will share my coat later. Floating "frames" (ed. note. rafts) were falling into the water somehow – I know not where from. My sister had been seasick the night before. I told her we have to get to one of the frames before they are overcrowded.

My sister went over the railing and let herself down on the rope, where the lifeboat went down on. We had doubled our clothes after we go back from our first attempt to get to Berlin. I still see my sister's skirt from her dress floating in a circle around her, then I thought about her riding boots she had on, and then, the water must be icy.

When I got on that rope down, her frame had drifted away. So I took the next frame, pushed myself up on it and looked for my sister all around. My aunt was still standing on the railing. Then I saw my sister with her waist out of the water, her heavy self-knitted sweater, green with white stripes showed off clear by light.

Then I saw the lights from the ship flare up. People screamed. The tail went up and the ship was gone.

The waves were high and it was -18 degrees Celsius. We had to balance our frame so we would not turn over. Someone called, "Boys, don't forget to move your legs!" After a while, frames were floating by empty. We had been 18 sitting or hanging on the raft. Now I counted 4 seamen. Their uniforms were hard as board (frozen). Our icicle hair started to dry.

The young man next to me had fallen inside the net. He stared at me and saliva came out of his mouth. I tried to lift him up, but couldn't. Across from me was a young seaman. He begged his comrades for one cigarette and told us about his daughter that had been born on Christmas and that he had not seen her. Then he fell backwards into the water. Finally, he was gone.

The remaining other two started to talk very negative – how our feet will be amputated, etc. Then they complained about my feet. I tried to move to hold them still. I bumped against theirs and that hurt. One said he had been torpedoed before and said it had never taken this long to be rescued. Waterbombs were being detonated under us.

Finally we saw searchlights on the horizon. We yelled and waved our arms. Finally they came near us and called with the bullhorn. They had to turn around to get us

from the right angle to the frame. There my two companions complained again. But the rescuers kept their word.

Now they told us they would throw their rope to us to catch it and secure it onto the frame so they could pull us to their ship. The seamen had stiff hands. They were holding onto the ropes of the frame. I had my hands between my shoulders and the coat. I was able to catch their rope and fasten it in some way.

I was the first one to be lifted on this school-torpedo boat *TS2* (aka *M-387*). I could not stand up. They had to carry me inside where all the refugees and rescued sat on the floor or were standing. They got a stool from somewhere for me.

Now, one sailor started to undress me from the top, the other from the waist down. A third one was standing with an army blanket and the fourth with a double vodka. I had only one shoe, without a heel on.

It was by now 2:30 in the morning. This torpedo-search ship was so overloaded that they had to ask for another search ship to bring them to the minefield of Swinemünde harbor. Buses were waiting for us to bring us to the university hospital.

As for my sister and aunt, I never heard from them again.

Helga currently lives in Meadview, Arizona.