

Wilhelm Gustloff Museum – Survivor Account

Irene (Canada)

Yes, I'm a survivor of the *Gustloff* by God's good grace – to this day I wonder why some of us were spared. Out of over 7,000 (mostly women, children, and wounded soldiers) only about 800 refugees were saved. It was in the Guinness book of records for many years as the worst ship disaster as far as loss of lives was concerned.

That ship did not need to be torpedoed since it was getting close to the end of the war. My 13 years old cousin Evelyn died. I found my mother in the water, we didn't know what happened to my little 5 year old sister. We left Gdynia (Gotenhafen) about 6 p.m. wearing lifejackets and packed into the salon just underneath the uppermost deck.

About 9 p.m. we felt a thud and the ship listed – the room was emptied of all furniture except for the grand piano, which started to roll towards us. As soon as the ship righted itself again, Mother took our hands and we made our way as quickly as possible upstairs onto the deck which was a bit icy. There we hung onto the rail until we felt two more hits (I understand the fourth torpedo misfired from the Russian submarine).

As the ship listed more and more (in just a few minutes) we couldn't hold onto the rail anymore and slid onto the only chimney of the ship and then the waves washed us into the sea.

I was 11 ½ at the time. It was dark, of course, there were already some lifeboats in the water with people in them and they wouldn't let us hang onto the ropes swinging from the side. I don't blame them.

I found my mother in the water and we swam to the rescue ship – T36. Two ladders hung from the side of the T36 with lifeboats in the water into which we climbed and went up the ladder with our elbows crooked because our fingers wouldn't work from the cold water.

The German navy men were so helpful, stripped us from our wet clothes and put us in hammocks with warm blankets. Mom and I didn't know at this point what had happened to my sister and girl cousin.

We watched somebody operate on a woman's leg, which showed a big hole and most of the night we kept throwing up seawater. The next day, we arrived at the Isle of Ruegen and were transferred to a Red Cross Ship (the Navy men gave us their clothes, but we had no shoes and had to go through the snow barefoot).

Anyway, we got onto the Red Cross Ship and my mom told me she would look for our clothes that were transferred from the T36 to the Red Cross ship. When she came back, I couldn't believe our luck. My mom found a little red, handmade sweater that only my sister could have worn – she picked it up and raced through the ship and came upon a room full of crying kids who had lost their mothers; and there sat my sister Ellen.

She was very traumatized by all this (apparently she got into T36 in a sling seat with help and since over 500 were rescued by that one ship alone, we didn't see her). To this day she does not like to speak about it and had a very hard time in school when it came to swimming – she could only go up to her waist in the water before she couldn't breathe and would panic.

I'm just going to sign our first name for now, because I haven't put pen to paper yet to write the story to leave my kids.

The Cruellest Night by Dobson, etc. and The German Expellees: Victims in War and Peace by Alfred Maurice de Zayas will give you excellent insight into what went on.

(A poem by Irene E. 1995 – A friend gave us a hammock as a gift a few years ago and the very first time I used it, I was gripped and thrown back to remember another time I had use of a hammock after being rescued from the ship *Wilhelm Gustloff* -)

My Hammock

I'll never forget when last I swung
some 50 years ago
in a different hammock.
Beads of condensation
dropping from steel of torpedo boat T36;
I, spewing sea water.

Through God's grace some of those thousands
lived through the cruelest night on the Baltic Sea.
who knows how many of the few rescued
are still alive and appreciate each dawning day?

A warm breeze stirs in the green canopy o'erhead
my hammock swings gently, and my eyes
catch twinkles of the sun's rays through the leaves.
What peace! And I think God I'm alive to savour this.