

Wilhelm Gustloff Museum – Survivor Account

Milda Bendrich as told & translated by her daughter Inge Bendrich

My Dear Inge!

As you were only 2 years old when we experienced the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, you cannot possibly have any memory of this event. The book by Heinz Schoen describes the events very true to life, as far as his personal experience allowed, or by as much as he was able to glean from other survivors. As everyone's fate is individual and you may one day be very interested to know the reasons why we fled from Gotenhafen and how it came to pass that we were among the 15% (at best) who survived, I would like to write a short account for you while my memory of the events is still intact.

Right: Inge and her mother shortly before evacuation.



It was the last week in January, 1945 and the coldest winter since two decades. The eastern front was closing in on Gotenhafen and women, children, and the aged were given permission to leave their homes. Suddenly, the Germans – old German Nationals like us, Reich Germans, who were posted to Gotenhafen for war duties, Baltic Germans who were invited to come back to the Reich at Hitler's invitation (many of these came home quite wealthy as they were financially compensated for wealth they left behind, without having to show any proof of value or ownership), as well as refugees from areas now occupied by Russians – realized that everyone had to flee as best they could. Previously, this had been punishable by death. Now permission was granted even to relatives of German Armed Forces to discuss freely the events at hand – the fact that the eastern front was about to engulf us.

For the last 2 – 3 months my parents, who are refugees from Central Poland, have been staying with me. With their help, I packed clothing, linen, crockery, books, and even carpets and transported everything on a sledge to the train station to be further dispatched to Ochtersum/Hildesheim. The only thing I ever saw again was a washing basket full of wool remnants and a dressing gown. That was 10 months later in Hamburg.

On about January 27th, I had a very early morning visit from a friend, a Marine – Oberleutnant. He came to ask if and how we intended to flee. There was no IF for

me, as I had heard enough about the Polish revenge on the Germans who chose to remain in Poland. The HOW I imagined would be by train. Now I learned that the train line ended in Pommern and the refugees were forced to walk the rest of the journey through the snow. I had been offered by my friends, a family by the name of Sika, to join them in fleeing to the Sudetengau (Boehmen). I declined and they left Gotenhafen. Many years later I learned that they had hardly arrived in Boehmen when they had to move again.

And now here was my visitor with the news that the “Kraft durch Freude” (Strength through Joy) ship – *Wilhelm Gustloff* – was anchored off Gotenhafen for the intended purpose of transporting relatives of wounded armed forces and, hopefully, refugees. My friend (I can no longer recall his name) was acquainted with the *Wilhelm Gustloff* purser and said he would try to obtain travel tickets for us. To make sure, I accompanied him to the harbor. At that time it was certain that the *W.G.* would be engaged in the above mentioned exercise, but nobody knew the time of departure.

The purser was quite happy to hand me the two tickets for you and me, but when I asked him for four more, two for my parents and two for my old neighbors (Germans from the Reich who had come to Gotenhafen for reasons God would only know as they knew nobody there and one of them was almost blind), he at first refused, saying that two productive people against four unproductive people was against his orders. I managed to persuade him that there was no way I could leave these old people behind to fend for themselves, and that if he insisted, then we would have to also stay back. In this way I blackmailed the purser into giving me the six tickets I needed, and thus the blame for the fate of my parents and these two elderly ladies rests with me.

We now packed the last remaining movable assets very carefully. The suitcases, cartons, and packets were loaded onto a 1.8M long sledge to a height of 1.7M. I know how high it was because my father was 1.72M tall. He pulled the sledge and I pushed, and from where I was, I could see the 2km path to the harbor. It took all the longer because we kept getting stuck in the deep snow. You Inge, were the only one who enjoyed this trip, as you were comfortably positioned and sheltered from the rough wind in a gap between the luggage as if you were sitting in a lounge chair.

We were happy when we had handed the last of our possessions to the crew of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* and we were directed to our places. My parents and the old ladies were to sleep on mattresses in the theatre, and you and I in a cabin with several berths which, as time went on, were insufficient for the increasing numbers of mothers and children. On the second night there was an air-raid warning, and many, including us, left the ship to seek shelter in an air-raid shelter.

I cannot remember in detail any of my companions fate except a 50 year old East Prussian lady who had already made the arduous journey from Koeningsberg. I noticed her because she was terribly nervous as if she had an inner feeling of the

impending disaster. Shortly before the *W.G.* received the order to leave, this woman left the ship. I don't know if she returned. I never saw her again.

We had been aboard the three days when we finally departed on the 30th of January and we already felt safe. It was not long before the first victims of sea sickness clung to the wash basins. An attempt to get to the toilets in time would have been useless because the corridors and stairs were crowded with people, mostly women and children. Of course I was sick too, as the heavy swell together with the foul smell in the cabin would have turned anybody's stomach. I can still remember that I fed you porridge for dinner and that I had a little of this myself to settle my stomach. We were told not to undress, but we took off fur coats and boots. You were partly undressed. We were all so exhausted that it quickly became quiet and dark in the cabin.

We would not have been asleep more than half an hour when I was suddenly flung from my berth. You were asleep against the wall and stayed there quietly, but that first hit had sent me flying. The second and third hit came in quick succession. In the meantime, I had picked you up and headed towards the door to turn on the light. Nothing happened. Soon a pale red light glowed in the corridor, scantily lighting the path.

And what I saw was a mountain of people, lying, sitting, and totally covering the stairs from C Deck to B Deck (this is how I remember the numbering of the decks). Why are these people not making any effort to mount the stairs when they could clearly see that the passengers from the cabins wanted to climb the stairs? Anyone hesitating to climb across the people below them or losing their strength, would end up under stamping feet. The panic had started. As this stage we did not even know why we were fleeing. Nobody experienced a torpedo hit before. We were women, children, not experienced seamen. It was much later that we understood why the people sitting on the stairs could do nothing to escape from the stampeding masses. I just hope that they were beyond feeling anything.

This one staircase, from C Deck to B Deck, consisting of two flights with a small square landing between, I climbed countless times in my mind in the coming years; you were in my arm, fighting against the wave of people behind me and the women in front of me who, like me, lacked the strength to fight on. Those who gave up were a further obstacle for the ones behind. I almost gave up when I came to the second half of the stairs when a woman behind me pushed me and said – "For God's sake, don't fall!"

Then suddenly there was a wider passageway ahead of me, but I could not go on. I just wanted to rest for a moment. Then I saw on the floor in front of me a little bit of snow in the shape of a ball. It was probably brought in from the Promenade Deck under someone's shoe. I could not have cared less about hygiene as I devoured this snow. Now I was able to continue. I did not have to fight for every centimeter now.

There were no bodies barricading my way. The torpedo hit had its harvest further below, not here.

I now had to find my parents, but the mattresses which they had slept on were now not occupied. The hall was empty except for a few old people who told me that the others had left a long time ago. That made me realize that quite some time had elapsed since the catastrophe. For a while I searched aimlessly for my parents, a task which was doomed to fail because of the sparse emergency lighting. The *W.G.* was now at an angle of 30 degrees. In the search for my parents, I had walked uphill by instinct. And so it happened that I stepped out onto a mirror-smooth sheet of ice which turned out to be the boat deck.

I stood, pressed against the wall of the ship, but again, as if by instinct, I worked my way across to the railing, as I could see men working on a boat by the light of the moon. Now, imagine me climbing this icy hill, without being able to gain a foothold and carrying a small child. I kept on ending back against the wall where I had started.

About a meter away stood a marine officer. He made no attempt to get to the railing. He appeared to be listening to noises, which sounded like whipping. Later I heard that some officers shot their families and children. Something seemed to pull my neighbor out of his trance and he ordered a soldier at the boat to help me. The soldier held onto the parapet and held his free hand out to me at the railing and were lifted into the lifeboat. While our boat was being freed, another which was already being lowered into the water capsized and lost everybody.

Inge, you did not make a single sound the whole time – since we left the cabin and in the lifeboat until 20 minutes or more later as I have no conception of how much time had passed – when you were carried up the rope ladder by a sailor of the Torpedo destroyer 36. On the TZ-36, we were separated and I did not see you again until the next morning. I was assured that a doctor had examined you and you were well. I must have suffered from shock as from the first moment I had felt no fear and instinctively know that I would not give up.

We were not on the TZ-36, and as many shipwrecked as could be reached were collected. Suddenly we heard a rumor that this ship too was threatened by submarines. The rescue area was suddenly evacuated, indeed so quickly did this happen that it seems one of the rescuers had to be left behind.

I spent this night sitting on a chair. Around me were women, women, each one engrossed with their own fate. As if in a fog I heard a woman in another screaming hysterically. Somebody explained that this woman had to leave her three children on the *W.G.*

Some time later on the 31st of January, 1945, we arrived in Sassnitz on Ruegen. Here, I have a gap in my memory, which I simply cannot fill. When I left my cabin on the

W.G., I could not possibly have put on my boots, as if I had done so, then I would still have had these boots when I arrived in Ochtersum. And I know exactly that I had no boots after the flight until, with the help of a few bartering items, I managed to have a pair of boots made by a boot maker who was a friend of my in-laws. So I arrived on the TZ-36 (and so did you) without any shoes. After we berthed, we walked with other shipwrecked people to a camp on a path made of trampled snow. A part of this path I can still remember clearly, but I cannot judge if it was much more than a kilometer. Could someone from the TZ-36 have provided me with shoes?

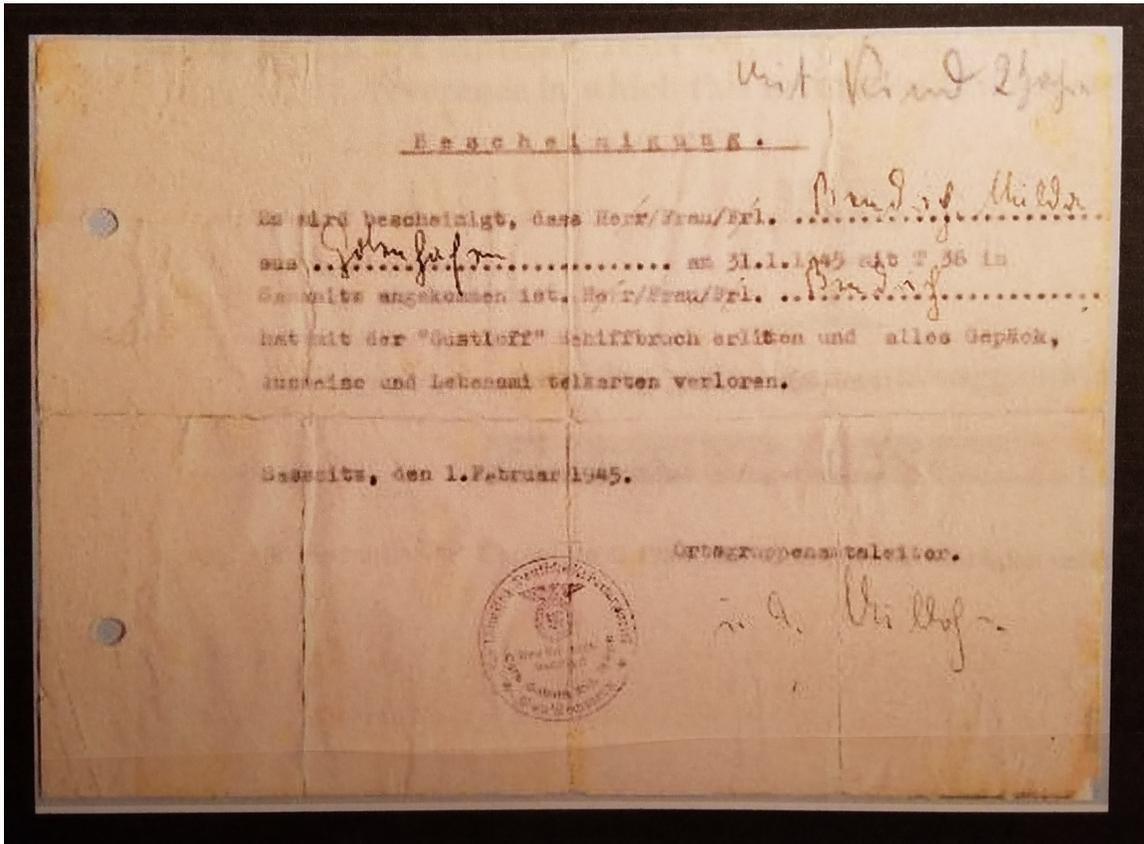
I remember that the camp had long rows of double story bunks. Two of these bunks were taken by two of the Marinehelferinnen who were rescued from the water. Both were totally naked under their blankets. The uniforms had to be cut from their bodies. One of the girls has a high fever; I was unable to talk to the other one.

In Sassnitz, we received from the Red Cross the most necessary items of clothing to be able to continue our journey to our destinations. My first aim was Ploen in Holstein, where I lived for a month with Fernande (Nanni) Pape. Nanni had lived with me for quite some time in Gotenhafen and we had become good friends. Naturally, Nanni told her friends and acquaintances about the sinking of the *W.G.* and about me. A few days after our arrival, the doorbell rang and at the door were two boys from the Hitler Youth. They threatened us with dire consequences should we insist on spreading rumors about the *W.G.* As things were at that time, we decided on the path of caution.

The only document to prove that this was not just a bad dream is the enclosed certification of the local group leader in Sassnitz.

(Handwritten) Your loving mother
(Handwritten) 9th, June 1981

Document on the next page:



Milda's Shipwreck Document

(Handwritten) "With child 2 years."

Certificate.

It is certified that Mr/Mrs/Miss (handwritten) "Bendrich, Milda" of (handwritten) "Gotenhafen" arrived in Sassnitz via T 36 on 31.1.1945. Mr/Mrs/Miss (handwritten) "Bendrich" was shipwrecked on the "Gustloff" and all luggage, identification papers and grocery ration cards were lost.

Sassnitz, 1st February 1945.

District Group Leader

(Official Social Security stamp and signature)