

Wilhelm Gustloff Museum - Survivor Account

I Survived History's Worst Sea Disaster

By: Hans Rittner, As told by A.A. Hoehling

"The *Gustloff* had disappeared beneath the waves. But all around me were bodies like dark, pitiful rag bundles – some crying, some praying, some screaming."

It is Tuesday, January 30th, 1945. The bells in Jude-Kirche clock tower have just struck noon. It is a hollow, cheerless sound across the icy, wintry port of Gotenhafen (Gdynia). The temperature is below freezing, the wind unbelievably bitter out of the east. Yet the sun is bright, glinting off the fine, spidery ice crystals that sometimes drift downward and outlining clearly the spires of Danzig rising high over the dock sheds. The last refugees and wounded soldiers are shuffling aboard the big Kraft durch Freude (Strength through Joy) ship, *Wilhelm Gustloff*. As a Navy doctor, I have been up day and night examining them all.

The chief steward has just completed count and finds there are 7936 mouths to feed, including the crew. Even he is appalled, and not because he cannot feed so many mouths. The modern galley equipment and cavernous refrigerators are equal to the unusual demand. But we're carrying more than four times the liner's normal capacity, four times as many people as when it cruised for the Deutsche Arbeitsfront (The German Labor Front) to the Canary Islands and among the Norwegian fjords in summertime. It's the equivalent of somehow jamming 20 persons into an average-sized family sedan.

For several days, the ragged, pitiful people have streamed into Gotenhafen, barely ahead of the Russian advance. The enemy has already struck terror into East Prussia. Entire families – some with ten children – set out in small boats along the Baltic coast to flee the Soviet armies. They are farmers, small shopkeepers, laborers, lawyers, university professors, all kinds – ordinary, average people.

A few tell of how the tanks pushed them off the roads into the woods, running down those who did not jump soon enough. Most are silent, gaunt, hungry, sunken-eyed. They are ill-clothed, many without boots, wearing mufflers around their feet for warmth. Trunks and wooden chests accompany all of them. But no more baggage can be permitted aboard – only a change of clothing, family pictures, Bibles, and other keepsakes.

At first we could billet families in rooms, expectant mothers in the dispensary. But now every cabin is filled, and mattresses stretch from wall to wall in the passageways and public lounges. Even the swimming pool has become a tightly-jammed dormitory for Marine Helferin ("Waves").

But even though conditions are crowded, everyone seems to have relaxed. The ship is warm and brightly lighted. The very size of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* makes one feel

safe. It is 26,000 tons, only 7 years old, with special fire safety equipment, dozens of watertight doors, and automatic davits. It also contains a dance floor, movie theatre, other recreational saloons, and all of its cabins have portholes.

On the harbor side of the liner, a towering, floating crane is completing the operation of removing the *Gustloff's* 22 diesel powered lifeboats and replacing them with small rowboats. They are stored loosely on the Sun Deck and the outdoor tennis court. Now the *Wilhelm Gustloff* tests its engines. No one is sure, after these days of waiting and apprehension, if the vessel will run. For three years it has lain at dockside, its bottom is fouled with barnacles.

On the pier and inside the half open sheds are the milling people for whom there is no room aboard. There is the look of final desperation on their pinched faces, and it is understandable since the Danzig area is completely surrounded by the enemy. The engineers are satisfied. The *Gustloff* casts off her lines. There seems to be no more hope for the human bee swarm on the wharves.

One man slips and falls into the harbor among the ice cakes. Perhaps he flung himself, I do not know. People look down at him in dazed apathy. A steward standing beside me shakes his head slowly.

"What a change," he observes sadly. "The last time we pulled out we looked at the fjords of Norway."

Now there is a growing hum from below as the diesel engines return to life after their long hibernation. The reassurance of the power is reflected in the passengers' faces. The cables between the liner and three determined tugs, looking like steam-spouting terriers, tighten and tighten until we fear they will snap with a doomsday crack! The *Gustloff* modally, ponderously, lengthens the gap between her towering drab steel sides and the pier.

Vaguely discernible, for the first time, is a sound from the people on shore; a crying, rippling moan of utter despair. We have left thousands behind in the waning afternoon. The chorus rises, then falls gradually fades as the *Gustloff* shoulders her way into the ice strewn harbor. It is difficult now to believe they are even people – but they are.

Behind them, the smoke spirals fainter in the east. The ship's sounds drown out the Armageddon of gun thunder. The bitter wind howls, lonely from out of the Artic. It is a world's end, a frozen motion, a nightmare. You shut your eyes and tell yourself when you open them you will find you had been sleeping. But no matter how much you will it, you cannot escape the reality.

People, almost fully relaxed, go below to rest. Now the huge liner will carry them to safety, west, far across the Baltic to Flensburg, to Kiel, to Lubeck perhaps. Many lie down on their mattresses and drop off to sleep. Others line up for food.

On deck, I watch the ship push down the channel. Ice-encrusted buoys, like macabre, metallic snowmen, bob in the liner's wake. We are beginning to round barren Hela point, and will be in the Baltic in moments. Already the seas roughen and the *Gustloff*, though barely out of the harbor, starts to roll. However, we are at sea, and I, too, am glad. I am a fatalist and do not worry.

I go to the cabin on the Upper Promenade Deck, starboard side (there are five other passenger decks) where I am billeted with three other doctors. One is a good friend, whom I shall call Karl, and he opens a bottle of champagne. There is enough but for one small drink apiece. He ties a string around the neck of the empty bottle and hangs it to the ceiling to show how much the *Gustloff* rolls.

I decide on one more look at land, and walk up to the boat deck. The wind is howling and darkness has almost arrived. Only the wink of Hela light and the dim red flash of distant gunfire shows where East Prussia rises sullenly out of the Baltic.

Our red and green running lanterns, on the port and starboard sides, burn with inappropriate gaiety, like Yule trees, and I wonder why they are not blacked out like the rest of the ship. A tiny escort vessel is dropping astern, in the choppy Baltic and soon we shall be left alone.

The wind dominates all, whining, cold. On the mast tips, St. Elmo's fire begins to dance. But now I am shivering and must return into the light and warmth of the big ship.

Inside I meet the commanding officer of our naval detachment. He has asked the ship's master to zig-zag, but the latter cannot. He says the vessel is fouled with seaweed and barnacles that is can barely make 15 knots, sailing straight ahead.

"We can never make Flensburg in two day's steaming if we zig-zag," is the captain's opinion. The *Gustloff* plows through the storm, burning her running lights. Navigation must be precise. Mine fields are replenished nightly by the RAF – another reason why zig-zagging is hazardous.

The passengers are already becoming seasick. The lines to the dining rooms are shortening. A few people are nervous and I try to soothe them. Soon the rolling and thrashing of the ship increases in the mounting gale. The engines strain. More and more people throw up where they lie. The passageways and public lounges gradually become fetid horror chambers – heavy now with much more than the usual ship odors of bilges, tar, fuel, oil, and paint.

Where there has been spasmodic conversation, interspersed here and there with lullabies in the babies – although there has never been any singing as such – there is now a silence, save for the obscene intrusion of retching.

Some of the young Navy men and women present a contrast. At home on a ship, they ignore the motion, and already walk about, hand-in-hand. A few, who have made one another's acquaintance more quickly, sit back in shadowy corners, kissing, or are heading towards the deck.

Abruptly the loudspeaker blares out a familiar voice. It is Hitler, speaking from the headquarters somewhere, possibly Berchtesgaden.

".... For twelve years I have held the destiny of the German people in my hands!" he shouts.

A discussion ensues among the ship's officers. Shall they risk reprisals from the Gestapo by turning the Fuehrer off, of chance a demonstration on board by allowing the inflammatory words to continue? At this stage of the war, Hitler is popular with almost nobody. They compromise and switch off the radio when the speech is half-finished. Static is the explanation.

Back in the cabin, Karl tells me a baby boy has just been born in the dispensary.

It is hardly past 7 PM but I am sleepy and tired. I turn in, removing only my necktie and shoes. From the top bunk along the inside wall, I watch the hanging champagne bottle sway like a pendulum.

The ship's noise becomes a symphony which lulls me to sleep. Soon, I am dreaming of my boyhood in Berlin. Suddenly, I am awakened. There are three heavy detonations far below which shake the whole ship. The lights go off and the *Wilhelm Gustloff* commences to roll to port. I am thrown against the wall.

We have struck a mine, I am certain. But I am not alarmed. The *Gustloff* is big and will make shore. Also, I believe the Baltic to be about 35 feet deep here. One of the doctors is frightened and leaves his cabin. As he opens the door, I hear the gathering terror in the passageway. Women shriek, old men moan, a few children whimper.

I look at the radium dial of my wristwatch. It is 9:15 PM. The emergency generator has been cut in and the lights flicker back. I put on my coat. However, I pause, groping to keep my balance against the list. I estimate we tilt to port nearly 40 degrees. I change my pants, socks, and boots. I will put on old ones so as not to dirty my good ones, which I will leave in my cabin. In my pockets, I place a little pistol.

Outside I grope my way through clinging clusters of people. An old woman clutches at my arm and asks if we are going to sink. I reply, "Of course not – and even if we do, the rescue boats will come out at once and pull us from the water." I believe it too, even though the *Gustloff* is at a tremendous angle.

Karl goes with me to see what we can do. The watertight doors, at first closed, are now open again and we move freely throughout all rooms and companionways.

Everywhere people stop us and plead for encouragement. Some have been thrown into struggling heaps from which they cannot disentangle themselves. A few older men and women sit against the sloping walls and sigh deeply, "oh-aah," "oh-aah," over and over, dazed, with no will to save themselves. The children hold tightly to their mothers or grandmothers.

With all this I do not think there is panic – not yet. I ascend to the port side of the Sun Deck with Karl. It is black and even more freezing and windy here. From the bridge they are shooting red distress rockets skyward from Very pistols. They are prettily shot into the night sky before they plume out in a shower of fiery sparks.

Karl and I continue into the wireless shack, holding onto any kind of support that presents itself as we move, lest we be flung off the deck and over the side. Inside, the operator, earphones tight against his head, eyes wide open and with terrible starring quality, is tapping his transmission key; "S.O.S.....S.O.S.....S.O.S....!"

We ask him if someone is coming to our aid. He answers slowly, leaning back slightly in his chair.

"I contacted the *Prinz Eugen*. But she cannot come because she has 1,500 refugees on board. It is too dangerous for her to come too close to a waiting submarine!"

I leave the light and high frequency hum of the transmitter room and walk onto the deck once more. I am shocked when I look down and see the water is but eight feet from the edge of the deck. Yet when I look across the deck to the starboard side, I see it towers high out of the water.

Lifeboats and rafts, which had been set loosely on the deck by the floating crane, are now clattering about, with no way to secure or in any way control them. Not far from me one boat careens wildly across the wet, slippery deck and crashes into a cluster of men and women.

They are carried quickly over the side and into the black, frothing sea. A ship's officer hurries past, leaning grotesquely against the list. He reports quickly,

"... three torpedoes. Soviet submarine. Almost all of our crew killed, in the engine room or in their bunks!"

Now I realize the full seriousness. I start below again, planning to pack my emergency kit with survival rations, chocolate, toiletries, change of socks, etc. On C Deck forward, on the port side just above where the torpedoes crashed in, I pause. I hear from below a cascade of inrushing water, like Niagara Falls. It is unbelievable in its speed and volume.

I find the main hatches as well as cabin doors have jammed shut by the explosion. The people inside cannot open them – but they pound on the doors and shriek

insanely for help.

I grab a fire ax and am able to break in several of the doors, freeing the people. In this area, thinking it a desirable one, I had found a cabin for a doctor-professor, his wife, and daughter. I soon realize I must hurry astern and tend to the injured. As I walk aft, one foot on the wall, the other on what was the floor, I hear sharp pistol shots from within the cabins. I believe the passengers, rather than drown, are shooting themselves.

Holding a flashlight, I continued on. Mothers call out to me, "Where is my child?" I do not know. Some suffer from psychic shock. An old woman sits atop a mound of fallen electric light fixtures, broken furniture, ripped mattresses, and a general disarranged sea of baggage and personal belongings. She chants over and over,

"I shall say 1955 and can't say it.... I shall say 1955 and can't say it...!"

The ship's lamps are dimming again. With my flashlight's narrow beam, I lead a cluster of whimpering, coughing men and women to a more open space on C Deck where I bandage cuts and put broken arms in temporary splints. A little girl with a fractured foot tells me bravely, "I am going to see my grandfather in Bremerhaven. He doesn't know I have a broken foot, does he?"

I give up. The list worsens and throws me on top of the patients I am attempting to treat. One old man grabs me about the throat and screams. It is not easy to break loose. Again, I hear the emotionless, dementous voice, "I shall say 1955 and I can't say it... I shall say 1955 and can't say it...!"

A steward whom I had come to know in the past few days bumps into me. I shine my light in his face and find his hair had turned white. I am carried along with the crying, sighing wall of people. Sometimes we crawl on the floor, sometimes on the wall, the list is that critical.

Now I am at the bottom of the stairway and I struggle upward, lifting myself by the metal tread guards on the edges. I gain two steps, someone grabs my ankle and I tumble back, scraping my face across the metal guards. But I am not afraid of dying. I keep telling myself, "This doesn't happen but once in a lifetime, this is really an experience." My ankle is seized again. I pull it sharply.

But I am not making progress up the steps. Someone ahead, a big, heavy man, stumbles and rolls down to the bottom, over me, momentarily knocking out my wind. I drop my flashlight, I hear the lens splinter, and now all is blackness again on the staircase.

The ship is lurching, with almost indescribable noise, and I wonder if the end is near. I reach forward, clutch wildly for the metal thread guard. My hand closes over something that feels like rope, involuntarily my fingers tighten and I tug hard.

A scream of pain, I let go. Too late did I realize it is a woman's braided hair. Some strands of hair dangle in my hand. A mother tries to soothe her child, "now don't fret, it'll be alright."

A woman in a Bavarian accent is praying "Der Herr ist mein Schafet", "The Lord is my Shepherd." By the time I get to the top, the gushing of water into the ship's vitals had grown loud enough to drown out the cries of the people. The *Gustloff* is dipping lower by the bow now.

I start to cough. There is the smell of carbon dioxide gas in the air, probably from the ship's fire extinguishers. My lungs burn. We are choking in the dark as the *Gustloff* plunges lower.

Outside, at last, on the glassed-in Lower Promenade Deck, Karl is beside me. People are ordered to stay here. If they surge up to the boat deck, the *Gustloff* may be capsized by their weight. The glass windows are an inch thick. They cannot possibly be opened or broken. The men and women begin to eye the windows in widening terror... the ocean washes up like a cold, green death on the outside of the glass, sloshes down again, surges back, higher. Everyone is jammed so tightly on this enclosed deck that no one can fall down.

Somehow I find a ladder and struggle up to the boat deck. There, I see Karl. I call to him. Without answering, he climbs over the railing and vanishes. I look at my watch. It is 10 o'clock. Suddenly, the siren commences to blow without stopping. Men and women behind me cling to ventilators, stanchions, davits, wire cables, anything that affords a hand grip, and cry out, "Please help me! – Can't you help me!"

Hats are torn off people's heads by the shrieking gale and fly past into the night. The siren blows on and on, so close it hurts the eardrums. The *Gustloff* tilts further over and sinks deeper by the bow.

I unbutton my coat, thinking I will try to swim to shore. It is probably 20 miles away. I cannot see a light. However, the clouds suddenly part and the moon whines white. It illuminates the packed people all around me, their faces looking up, frozen in horror. A lifeboat nearby hangs uselessly from one davit.

Next to me a scholarly-appearing old man is murmuring, "Lotte, we are close to eternity. Let us be brave, ja?" The rift in the clouds grows bigger, exposing steely blue sky bordering the brilliant moon. It is like an opening up of heaven. There is a sighing around me.

The ship lunges. The mast tips trace an arc across the scudding clouds, across the blue of the sky, across the cold, impassive moon. I think of jumping, but before I can move the water has surged up to my chest, as though a tidal wave has all at once engulfed a piece of shore. In the next instant I am swimming, striking out with arms and legs. I hear the siren blowing, people shouting and gurgling.... The siren stops....

It is no more... I am grabbed around the neck and I go down, down.

The first hard stabs of pain all over my body have already been numbed by the subfreezing water. The lack of sensation is almost pleasant and I realize I must fight to maintain consciousness and the will to live. I gave a course in swimming in the Marine Academy and I know about life saving. I break the man's grip and rise a second time. But, once more, I am seized and go under. This time, approaching exhaustion, I have difficulty in breaking loose. The person is fighting very hard.

Finally, I am free and on the stormy surface of the Baltic once more. There is nothing to be seen of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*. The noise from the people is dying down, and all about me are bodies, like dark rag bundles being tossed on the waves.

In a few moments something bulky washes up close to me. I grab it. It is a small raft and I hang on. Other people appear from out of the darkness. I cannot even tell if they are men or women. Some begin to scream and cry for help and I say, "Try to save your strength. Pray!"

When I try to change position on the edge of the raft, I realize my hands are frozen solid. I cannot move my fingers. I push an arm over the side, hooking my elbow for a purchase. The salt water I have swallowed now burns my stomach. There is probably oil in it too. Reflexively, I commence to vomit, as to others clinging to the raft.

I decide I will die for sure if I stay here. It is scant protection against the crashing waves, and it is submerging from too many people. More hands are appearing to clutch for finger room. Someone with long finger nails has already missed a hand hold and brought his or her nails down across my face. My whole face is probably lacerated, but I can feel nothing, as though I am under deep anesthesia.

The moon glints momentarily from the light gray sides of a lifeboat, at least 25 feet away. I slide back under the water, and kick away from the raft. It is difficult to swim with no use of my hands. I flail my arms and kick stiffly with my legs. I must reach the lifeboat.

I make it and somehow hold onto the side. A little girl, not quite ten years old, has also attached herself to the side. I try but I cannot crawl over the gunwales from where I am. "Little girl," I gasp hoarsely, "will you please move a little so I can get in the boat? Then I will help you in." She manages to shove over a few feet as the boat bounces up and down on the tumultuous sea. Clumsily, I roll my whole body over the side and into the boat, which was three-quarters filled with water. It contains about a dozen people, all sitting still, straight, and silent.

As soon as I recover my wind, I reach my arms down on either side of the little girl, who is there, waiting patiently. My hands are still frozen but she clutches my arms and I hoist her up and over the gunwales. I stare at her. There is something strange.

It is her hair, standing straight out in the back of her head like stiff, refrigerated herring. For a few moments I continue to stare. I cannot erase the madness of the picture from my mind. She sits down. Presently, she looks at me and asks, "Where is my mother? Do you know where my mother is?"

Now a woman on a seat in front of me leans back and hands me a shawl, without a word. I take it, try to thank her, but find my vocal cords are too cold and congested to speak. I wrap the shawl around my head but am unable to tie a knot.

The moon is bright and others in the boat have recognized my blue uniform, although they cannot tell I am a doctor. The sight of the uniform seems to give them a measure of confidence. But I can do nothing except sit and shiver. I cannot even keep warm, as some are doing by waving their arms to and fro and slapping themselves with their hands.

Once more the little girl, whose hair is still standing stiffly out, asks, "Wo ist meine Mutter?" The time wears on. My watch, a special Navy issue, is still running. It is now 11 PM, an hour since the *Wilhelm Gustloff* sank. The sea is just as rough, cold, and windy, and I wonder how we can possibly reach land, drifting aimlessly as we are. I doubt there are oars in the boat.

The people do not move about. They sit stiffly upright in the same places I saw them when we first struggled aboard. I get the crazy notion that we may be all dead, that we are frozen corpses, being driven I know not where. The deep silence which has engulfed everyone strengthens my impression. I still hear the wind, though not as distinctly. On the other end of the cross seat I am sitting on is a heavily-bundled woman. I lean over to see if she is breathing.

Slowly, without my touching her, she topples over. With my frozen hands and forearms, I am powerless to help. She slides into the water sloshing in the bottom of the boat and her head goes under. I try to call out but everyone else is staring ahead, still propped up, still motionless, like the dead patient in their graves awaiting judgment day. They cannot hear me because my throat remains stiff. If I make a sound, they do not hear it.

I reach down, somehow hook my arms around her waist. I pull her up, till she is seated in the water in the bottom of the boat. I put my ear to her face, to her chest, and I am sure she is dead. I rest her against the seat and sit straight up myself once more.

In the moonlight, I begin to notice other boats and rafts, tossing in the sea. We are not entirely alone. The radium dial of my watch says it is now 11:30. Soon it will be midnight, and some hours after that, morning. Perhaps we shall drift ashore. I am very thirsty, but I know I cannot drink seawater. We sit upright and the sea tosses us about in the moonlight. The wind blows against my face. I do not think of home, I do not think of my childhood, my mother, my brother or my father. I sit and do not

think other than to wonder, again, if I am dead... floating with the currents in a kind of eternal hell.

Finally, it is almost midnight by my watch. I see lights, faintly in the distance, then drawing nearer rapidly. As first, I wonder if it is another enemy submarine. But now I make out the silhouette, the mast light – it is a German torpedo destroyer.

It is beside us, although no one in our boat is cheering. They accept salvation in the same numbed stupefaction that has marked our night of drifting. A man stands up and clutches the Jacob's ladder suspended from the vessel's side. He takes a step up on it. He is too stiff to make further headway, totters, falls back, misses the lifeboat before any of us can reach out to help, and splashed into the dark water. He never comes up.

The others are more fortunate. I see other lifeboats and rafts clustering around the torpedo destroyer. Her sailors are climbing into some of them to help the injured out and aboard the ship. My boat is empty and I start up the ladder. Suddenly, I clutch it with all my strength to hold on. With a whoop-whoop of her siren, the fast little warship has suddenly bounded ahead in the night, executing a steep turn to port.

I hear hoarse shouts as we surge away from the boats and the rafts. We are leaving some of the torpedo destroyer's crew as well as *Wilhelm Gustloff* passengers. Now, another sound, the unmistakable reverberating: Whoom-rattle-rattle! Whoom-rattle-rattle! as depth charges are hurled astern, in our wake.

We are zig-zagging. Arms pull me onto the deck. Torpedoes had been sighted streaking towards us, a sailor explains. We got underway just in time. Sunk twice in the same night would be too much. We cannot go back for the other survivors.

Now I go shivering into the galley. It is warm and bright. Hot tureens of soup are waiting and they smell good. Other survivors are here. Their faces and hands are blue, some bear cuts and bruises. None are especially pretty to look at.

The depth charges are still being dropped, the little ship leans from side to side as we race away from the submarine (or submarines). I keep my clothes on, wet as they are, to be prepared to go over the side again, if I must. I know the clothing's protection has already saved my life once tonight. I am still numb with cold, and shake, but I am alive.

My fingers are not thawed out. It is only with difficulty that I ladle soup. I cannot even obtain warmth for my hands by thrusting them into my sudden, clammy pockets.

The ten year old girl is beside me, wrapped in a blanket, and she asks again, "Wo ist meine Mutter?" After a few hours, my fingers return to life. They are red and hurt,

but that is good. They probably are not frost bitten. Other people do not fare so well. I see purple hands and purple feet, which may ultimately have to be amputated. One man sits by himself, his blanket gradually tumbling off him, and screams in agony. The sensation is returning to his legs. I pack cold rags against his legs, soothing them somewhat.

Finally, I go up on deck. If we are torpedoed or strike a mine, I will be much more likely to survive outside. Below, I could be trapped or fracture my skull from being thrown against the ceiling or bulkhead.

It is almost dawn. I can see the brightening, the dull crimson in the sky to the east. I meet the ship's doctor and we chat a while, out in the cold, blustery dawn. He tells me he has just delivered a baby girl in the engine room – the mother is remarkably well. He is also impressed with the fact that all survivors are young, thin people. There is almost no one past 40. He hasn't made a count, but is uncertain if they picked up 300 or 500 people. "Others should be picked up by other ships," he states.

As I move around the torpedo destroyer, I find that word of the birth has spread. It brings a flicker of warm smiles to people's faces. Now the sun is just rising over the low, bleak sweep of dunes. Wednesday, January 31st is commencing. It is also the 7th year of the war.

We are fast approaching land and have ceased to zig-zag. I see one of the ship's officers of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* in a dry uniform. He had never touched water obviously. I do not like that, but who am I to pass judgment? By midmorning, we disembark at the little seaport of Sassnitz on the bleak island of Ruegen. Here again it is all ice. We trudge over rutted, frozen streets. We present a dismal, ragged spectacle. People peer at us through frosty windows as they would stare at a funeral procession.

For a while I remain in the general dock area to meet the other ships with survivors. They do not arrive.

The time drags on. I buy some chocolate, but I have difficulty in sending a telegram to my mother in Darmstadt. I volunteer to act as examining doctor on ships arriving at quarantine. My offer is accepted, but as the hours pass it becomes obvious there are no other survivors from the *Wilhelm Gustloff* to be examined – at this port.

Finally, word filters through the Navy office: perhaps a total of 300, certainly no more than 400 survivors have come ashore at Kolberg, or have been returned to Gotenhafen. Added to the number here in Sassnitz, this would mean a total of only some 800 saved out of nearly 8,000 who sailed on the *Gustloff* last evening. It is impossible for me to believe. This would mean almost six times as many have perished as in the great *Titanic* disaster in 1912.

The others cannot accept it either, the others here who have lost all their families

and friends. Their very tearlessness makes their grief all the more terrible. It is almost evening when the Third Class coaches, with their hard wooden seats, are rolled in by puffing, warworn little locomotives. Steam and smoke billow skyward with a desolate, pluming beauty.

Most of the refugees go onto the train; there are few accommodations in Sassnitz. They do not protest, although there are expressions on their faces which indicate they would rather remain here by the water's edge, watching down the channel which leads in from the Baltic.

In the morning, I am still here and the news seems fairly established now. There are only 800 survivors, at most. There are no more – not anywhere. The last boats have come ashore along the Baltic hours ago.

But I will wait here. So does the little girl who was in the lifeboat with me. She recognizes me in my somewhat pressed uniform as a medical man. I keep encountering her as I pace the slippery, cold streets, and she asks, "Wo ist meine Mutter, herr Doktor... Wo ist meine Mutter?.... Meine Mutter?"

Only the wind answers. The bitter, forlorn wind which blows incessantly in from the Baltic.



Dr. Hans Rittner