

Wilhelm Gustloff Museum – Survivor Account

Rose Petrus

I, Rose Petrus, (Formerly Rezas) am from Schwarzort (today Juodkrante, Lithuania), a small village of 400 inhabitants. I have survived the cruel disaster of the sinking ship *Wilhelm Gustloff*. I worked in Gotenhafen (Gdynia today). The Russians were pouring through the front, came closer and closer... there was no way out, but over the waters by the Baltic Sea. The photo at right shows Rose during her time in a 'displaced persons' camp not long after the *Gustloff* disaster. She is wearing a traditional Lithuanian dress.

The *Wilhelm Gustloff* was a beautiful ship built for joy and pleasure to travel in calm waters. During the war, it lay in the port and served to house Navy personnel. But with the Russians advancing, the city of Gdynia was full of refugees from the east, so everything afloat, including the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, was put into service.

My sister Ursula (Ulla) was with me at the time. She was on vacation and not able to go back to Memel (Klaipeda today) where she worked. We got permission to leave and go on board the *Wilhelm Gustloff*. The harbor was packed with refugees. Most were completely exhausted from days of traveling through cold and snow. They had heavy packs on their backs and now were pushing to get on board the *Gustloff*. It was hard to believe that we were refugees too, and if we could only get on board we would be saved, no matter where we were going. With our suitcases in our hands, and a purse with our papers in the other, we walked in cold and gusty winds through the snow 7 miles to the harbor. After a long wait, we got on the ship and somebody handed each a life jacket.



We were with 18 other girls, then we were led to one corner of the ship. I don't remember which deck it was, someplace below though. I remember that we had to lay on the floor. In all the hallways, and everywhere, people were stacked like sardines. Children crying, it was a pitiful sight. Still refugees were arriving. A lot slipped by without registration. Somebody showed us a corner to lay down on a floor. I don't know how we passed the days. It was January 25th, 1945 when we got on the ship, and finally, on January 30th, 1945, the *Wilhelm Gustloff* started to move. We heard that the reason it took so long to get started was because the right escort never arrived.

People were standing on the pier screaming, "Take us with you!" Little did they know that it was better not to be on board.

It took a long time for the ship to reach deeper water. There was a strong wind, and very cold. It was getting dark. The ship started to rock and it was impossible to go on deck. I got very seasick, and when my sister and I settled into our corner, I thought maybe sleep will come. Then we heard someone over the loudspeaker say, "Don't take your clothes off, everybody put on your lifejackets." So I put mine under my head as a pillow, and to have it close by.

It took the *Gustloff* about 4 hours to reach deeper water. Nobody knew where the ship was going, but everyone was tired and we just wanted to get some sleep. I had just settled my sister by my side. Then, all of a sudden, there was a bump, as if the ship hit something. Then a second bump, much harder and louder. My sister and I got scared, as did everyone else. A panic started, and there were women screaming, children crying, but not knowing where. I felt something was wrong, and then there was a third hit and the *Gustloff* began to tilt to one side.

My sister grabbed me by my lifejacket and we ran. We knew we had to get to higher decks so we could jump into the water when we had to. We stepped over people's bodies and finally reached the Lower Promenade Deck. We heard orders to, "Please keep quiet, we will hold the ship," but nobody listened. All of a sudden, the lights went out. Then a voice on the loudspeakers said, "The ship is in danger, women and children to the lifeboats." What a joke! From standing in one place for so long, nothing seemed to work. All of the lifeboats were rusted or frozen to the ship. Heard later that only 4 to 6 came loose. We were all standing, but the ship started turning lop-sided and we all started to slide down. My sister and I were still holding hands. One of our good friends standing near by said, "Kids, now we have to die."

"No!" my sister yelled, and with great effort we reached a window where we could hang on. All of the people were sliding down on top of each other. We could only hear screaming and crying. There were also shots being fired too.

My sister and I were still hanging on and trying to break the glass of the window, but nothing would give. There was one officer balancing on the window and he shot the glass. We pushed with our hands to break it, and there was blood running down our hands, but we didn't care.

My sister managed to crawl out, but I didn't see her after she disappeared in the icy water. People pushed so hard, and I managed to get out too. All of a sudden, I felt the cold water. I felt almost hot at first, but I got under and knew it was the end. I only hoped I would lose consciousness first.

But I came up and got air. It was good I had my lifejacket on, so then I swam a few strokes. I saw the *Wilhelm Gustloff* almost under water. People were everywhere swimming and screaming. Children with lifejackets much too big, floating heads in the water, legs up.

Then I felt I was being pulled down. I knew since I grew up by the Baltic Sea that there's a strong pull when a ship sinks. I tried to swim away in another direction. The waves were so high it was impossible. I felt somebody was pulling my legs. There was an old man hanging on to me. I screamed and told him to let go of me because he was pulling me down. I kicked as hard as I could and he finally let go. I tried to swim a few strokes, but the icy water and cold wind were unbearable.

Now I saw less and less people floating around. I saw lights far away, but couldn't understand why nobody was coming to rescue us. Then I got a hold of a life raft full of people, but with one hand I got a grip on the rope. It is a little easier to swim, I start feeling the cold, my shoes had untied, I kicked them off.

I hold myself in a position that nobody can get a hold of me. I feel, not much longer I will have the strength to go on, what will happen? I must let go, my left hand is starting to get tired and numb. That was the hand that was holding onto the raft. All of a sudden, I see a lifeboat – so I get hold of it, but it is overloaded and everybody is yelling, "Nobody can come in, we'll all go down."

With all my strength, I swing myself over into the lifeboat. The lifeboat is full of water. I kneel down and hold myself with both hands, so as not to get washed overboard from the high waves. We all yell in chorus, "Help, Help, Help!" Nothing happens, we see lights far away, and we wonder why nobody comes to our rescue.

Some people, already frozen to death, lay in the water of our little boat. We try to warm ourselves on the bodies. The water is so cold, and the waves so high, it goes over our heads. My hair is full of icicles – it felt like that.

It had all started around 9pm. I looked at my watch, but it was gone. I had only the watchband around my arm. Somebody said it was 3:30am. We all felt we had no more hope. We could not cry for help anymore, our horrified cry is still in my ears, and I will never forget it as long as I live. We had just given up, drifting in the cold water. There was a little boy in the boat, 8 or 9 years old. He kept on saying, "Let's yell one more time, then we will be saved, don't give up." With our last effort in chorus, we cried out "Help, Help, Help!" I still hear that cry... We all know we could not last much longer. Everybody was very quiet – maybe some said a last prayer. I had also given up – we will drown. Dear Lord, I thought, you've helped me this far, please don't let me suffer, help me a little more." I even remembered a hymn my grandmother taught me about a ship that was sinking, and only the Lord can help. More and more persons fell down in the lifeboat, frozen or from exhaustion.

Then, all of a sudden, we looked out, and saw a big ship, not too far from us. Before we knew what was happening, they had thrown a rope to us and we were pulling alongside the ship. O what joy! Help finally! They took the boy first, then me. I remember I lifted both hands up and they pulled me over the railing on board the big ship.

I must have passed out. When I came to, I was dressed in men's clothing – like from the Navy. My legs were swollen, and my knees were like pillows, and so were my hands. I could not straighten my feet. They were so stiff from kneeling in the cold water for so long. I just wanted to be warm after the cold water. Somebody gave us whiskey to drink to feel a little warmer. It was 4am in the morning. This ship, a German destroyer, was overloaded with refugees.

Then I remembered my sister Ursula, and I started to worry, and asked if anyone had seen her. People thought I was crazy – 6,000 or more people on the *Gustloff* and I ask about my sister – it is just impossible to find her. But one officer came into the cabin and heard me complaining. He said, "What, you had a sister? There is a girl in the next cabin who had been on the *Gustloff*, and she looks like you almost." Somebody helped me to stand up, so I went to the next cabin. There she was, eating hot soup! "Ulla!" I cried out, and we were in each other's arms. We said a prayer and we were sure God had performed a miracle, and saved us both – on the same ship, so many hours apart!

We didn't know where the ship was going, moving very slow. I started to get sick and sicker – I thought I would lose my legs.

We finally reached a port – Swinemunde. There, I was a long time in the hospital, with second and third degree frostbite. I was afraid I would lose my legs, and I was very ill with pneumonia. I was sent to Denmark to recuperate, and I was still there when the war ended. I had lost everything, friends, and did not know where my mother and other sister and little brother were.

This is my testimonial. I wrote this historical event, just as I lived through it.

Below: Even 61 years later at the age of 80, Rose says that not one day goes by without thinking about this tragedy. She currently lives in Denver, Colorado. All rights reserved, Copyright 2003 Rose Petrus.

