

Wilhelm Gustloff Museum – Survivor Account

Bill J.

Sixty years later, Bill J. still finds it difficult to openly discuss the *Gustloff* disaster. Growing up near Gotenhafen during World War II, he says the realities of war were part of his life when experiencing “tragedy almost everyday”. He emphasizes that you become almost desensitized and bury many memories deep inside. He says that many of the images from his experience of the sinking come to him like flashes from a “black and white” movie. Furthermore, for years he could not bring himself to discuss the subject because he felt no one would believe the extent of the tragedy – the sheer number of people who lost their lives.

As a young boy peering through the window frames in his home, he clearly remembers seeing the “fantastic large ship” docked at the pier. As any young boy would, he would dream of the adventures he could have aboard the vessel. Little did he know, he would be a young passenger attempting escape to the west aboard the “beautiful ship” on January 30, 1945.

At the age of 9 years old, and fearing the arrival of the Russians, he boards the *Gustloff* with his mother and two sisters. Traveling by train is not an option – the Soviet Red Army controls the railways south of Danzig. The only practical method of escape westward aboard the former KdF cruise ship. Stationed in the western part of Germany, his father anxiously awaits their arrival into safer haven – away from the danger of the Eastern Front.

Leaving their home with only a small suitcase between the four of them, the family walks a few kilometers toward Oxhöft Pier in Gotenhafen. Getting there by foot is the only option since no other methods of transportation exist to them. The young family is one of the last few to successfully make it on board. Bill remembers that thousands of people were trying to storm the boat when they made their way up the gangway.

Once on board, his mother makes it clear to them and his sisters that they would not be going below to a cabin (there would be no room anyway). They would have to stay around a landing area on the upper decks near an overhang and close to a row of lifeboats – a decision that will undoubtedly prove to be smart. His mother is very aware of the dangers the Baltic can bring from hearing about other ships that have been sunk. “At least we can all swim if something happens”, she told her children. It is this combination of caution and savvy that will save them in the not so distant future.

Once on the ship, Bill remembers being so proud and excited to be on a big ship. For years, he had dreamed of boarding the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, or any of the other ships docked in Gotenhafen. Now he was on board, and heading to the safety of the West (something understandably much more on the mind of his mother). At this point,

Bill and his sisters were “not frightened in the least.” It is more of an adventure to them.

That is until the first torpedo hit. Bill remembers “a big bang”. The whole ship shakes. People begin scrambling all over the ship. On the decks, he recalls people rushing and climbing to get to the lifeboats and life rafts.

Seconds after the first explosion from the first torpedo, Bill’s mother says “That’s it” and needed only move the family what seems a few feet to the nearest lifeboat, where the tarp is already being torn off by anxious passengers and crew. Bill remembers people climbing in (maybe 10 – 15 occupants – well below the lifeboat’s capacity). The ice and cold make it a challenge to prepare and lower the lifeboats. At some point while the lifeboat jolts and shakes its way down toward the water, the back of Bill’s head smacks heavily against the lifeboat. He is temporarily knocked out and left with a sizable bleeding gash. He carries the scar to this day.

The next thing Bill recalls is the sight of the “PT boat” coming along side of the lifeboat. Crew members begin to pull out him, his family, and a handful of other freezing survivors. Eventually, the boat, believed to be returned to the shore some 16 miles away. Ironically, the family ends up back in Danzig to a home they never believed they would see again. News of the extent of the disaster begins to filter through. It is not until later that the family learns of the terribly small number of those who were successfully rescued.

News also filters through to the western parts of Germany. Bill’s father, assuming the whole family has drowned, leaves his current duties and volunteers to defend Germany to its bitter end. Tragically, he dies in battle only two hours before the official surrender in May, 1945 – never to know that his wife and three children were safe. By this time, the family he would never see again had made it successfully out of the Bay of Danzig to safety in the west. On March 8th, 1945, the family had once again left Gotenhafen – this time on a small freighter (of course, mother insists without much argument they stay near the upper decks again). This time they make it successfully to Copenhagen and eventually back to Germany.

Bill cannot understand why this tragedy had gone relatively unnoticed for many years. Although he does credit the internet and recent written works as having an impact in “releasing” information to the public. He also felt that when the movie *Titanic* came out in 1997, it helped increase the profile of the *Gustloff* tragedy (simply by the inevitable comparisons and quest for more knowledge). However, this was one movie Bill wanted to avoid. “When the movie *Titanic* came out, I had no desire to see it – because I know what’s going to happen... like a foreboding feeling coming up.” He has no desire to bring memories like these to life again.

Bill immigrated to Canada after the war and was a geological engineer with a major Canadian company for many years before retirement.