

Wilhelm Gustloff Museum – Survivor Account

Leonilla Zobs

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The phone call surprises her.

That was such a long time ago, she says. She was a young woman then, just 23. Now she doesn't remember things so well. But, yes, she was on the *Wilhelm Gustloff*. A ship that Hitler built. Named after a Nazi, it was filled with refugees



that day, not socialites like the *Titanic*. Maybe that's why not very many people know the story of how it sank on January 30, 1945.

But Nellie Zobs knows. She doesn't remember the date anymore, only that it was so cold and she wore her winter boots and a heavy woolen coat over her dress and she walked to the harbor with her father and her girlfriend and her girlfriend's mother.

She climbed aboard an ocean liner overflowing with people escaping the advancing Russian Army.

"We thought we were so lucky to get on the *Wilhelm Gustloff*," says Nellie. "We were getting away."

Thousands and thousands of desperate people were getting away with them – wounded soldiers and Army nurses, but mostly refugee families and mothers with babies.

"People were just squeezing on. We had to stay on the top floor, the highest floor."

She doesn't tell this story very often. Write it down, her children tell her. But she never has. "I don't write so good," she tells them. "I can't express myself very well." The boat left from a place called Gotenhafen, Nellie says on the phone.

"Come over and I will show you on the map."

When you arrive at the modest ranch house where Nellie and her husband, Peter, raised their son and daughter, the atlas is open. A route is traced in pencil on page 63. A small woman, a widow with tight brown curls, bends over the table. Her bent finger points to Latvia, where she came from. She had fled to Poland that summer. Her father came a few months later. Her mother stayed behind.

The Russians will be leaving soon, her mother told them. I will be safe here on the farm. Was she? It was the Russians who sank the ship. Three torpedoes with names written on their sides.

For the Motherland, For the Soviet People, For Leningrad.

The pencil mark leaves the port and pushes out into the Baltic Sea. Nellie's finger follows it. And then, it stops. She remembers the first torpedo. She was in the bathroom. She just sat down and then a great big boom. After that, she forgot about going to the bathroom for the longest time, she says, laughing. Even after she was safe on the rescue ship.

They say maybe 10,000 people were on the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, a ship built for 1,880. They say nearly 9,000 people died, the biggest maritime disaster in history. They say that only a few lucky ones survived. Some books say 400, some say 1,000. Whatever the number, Nellie says she was lucky.

When she came out of the bathroom, the ship was tilting. People were rushing everywhere. She saw her father go one way, running. He didn't see her. She couldn't get to him.

"I lost him and I didn't see him again." She says it so matter-of-factly. It was so long ago. It is hard to go back. She found her friend, though. The friend's mother wanted her suitcase. That suitcase saved them, Nellie says. They went one way, looking for the suitcase. Everyone else went the other way. Sailors helped them into a lifeboat. They went only a little way in the sea when she heard that sound.

A big yawn. Then the people screaming and the *Wilhelm Gustloff* disappearing into the sea. It wasn't too long before a German boat came and pulled them aboard. She sat in the engine room, trying to get warm. She didn't feel anything, Nellie says. Only empty.

For years, she thought maybe her father lived, had somehow been rescued from the icy water and taken to Sweden or Norway. She went to the Red Cross. Did they know of a man called Voldemar Minkevics? They did not. Her father was really gone. And the Russians didn't leave Latvia, so she couldn't go home to her mother.

So a young woman called Leonilla – her hair was blond then she was taller and she wanted to be a lawyer like her father – wound up in England and then met a young man in Scotland and they fell in love and came to Lincoln in 1958.

Peter was a baker. Nellie worked at Bryan Hospital. She didn't become a lawyer after all. In those years in Europe after the ship went down, she trained to become a nurse instead. Her blond hair turned dark, the children grew up, she retired.

She had Peter's parents here in Lincoln, but she had not talked to her own mother in 40 years. It wasn't safe to write home. The government might open letters and punish her mother for having family in America. They had already sent her grandmother and uncle, her nieces and nephew to Siberia, but that's another story, Nellie says.

In the early 1980s, things started to change in Latvia. There was Gorbachev and Perestroika. She took a chance and wrote a letter. Where could she start? How could she start? With her Peter? With the children, Andrew and Elisabeth? With the good news? Or with the bad news?

She simply told her mother, whom she would never see again, that Father had died. And that she had survived the sinking of a ship called the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, in the Baltic Sea, on a cold night in January, 1945.