

Our Emigration to America, 1957

Translated From Gisela Sonntag's Journal

On **Tuesday, March 26, 1957**, after some last minute formalities, we left our temporary home in Bremen-Lesum around 10 AM. We were given food for our journey and, in brilliant sunshine, boarded modern buses, which took us to the train in Bremen-Vegesack. Following a half-hour wait and approximate one hour clean and comfortable ride, we arrived in Bremerhaven, directly at the Columbus Pier where we were greeted with music and immediately went on Board. Once on Board, we immediately went to our sleeping cabins, men and women were housed separately, which meant that Heinz went off with his sons and I went off by myself. When I first entered the large dormitory style cabin, I became frightened because all I could see were beds next to each other and stacked on top of each other and women rummaging through their suitcases. I don't know exactly how many slept in our cabin, maybe 100. After closer inspection I found it was not too bad, just very limited space. You can, however, take limitless hot showers and wash up, so that is a definite advantage. After about a half-hour I had enough and marched up on deck. I met up with my men surprisingly quickly and soon after we left the pier. At 3 PM the sirens were heard for a third time and the band played: "Muss I' den, muss I' den zum Städtele hinaus". The ship was slowly pulled out and we saw our good "Old Germany" for the last time in brilliant sunshine.

Only a half-hour later we received our first instructions about the customs and rules of the ship since "*General Langfitt*" was not a passenger ship but was originally a troop transporter.

Initially almost all passengers found the lay-out of the ship puzzling. Everyone just went up and down the stairs without finding anything, particularly not what they were looking for. Around 6

PM we had our first meal, which was good and plenty. And now we are lying in our beds, very groggy but happy that we've come this far. During the night, the clock was turned back one hour.

Wednesday, March 27. The day started with an endless search for my men. The ship is very exhausting because, unlike on a passenger ship, each individual desk does not completely wrap around. So in order to get to another set of stairs you have to go all the way up again. Everyone is getting lost and is endlessly asking and searching, and this has become our main activity. Between 10 and 11 AM we passed Dover, which we were able to see very well despite of bad weather (rain). But then it slowly started to become uncomfortable and the first passengers became ill. Toward the evening Volker and Rüdiger did not feel so well either, even though we only had wind speeds of 5. In one of the big halls constant entertainment is provided for us. So, today we took one hour of English lessons. This afternoon we had a safety drill – life preservers on and to the life boats. Afterwards we listened to a lecture on American measurements, weights and coins and watched two short films about American every day life. The three meals per day were all typical American foods. The food was good, but we found the combinations of food funny for our tastes. Today, for example, we had creamed vegetable soup, spaghetti with tomato sauce, carrots, baked fish, bread, butter, cookies, and fruit salad for lunch. The ship is pitching and tossing quite a bit; we take pills and hope they will help. During the night, the clock was turned back another hour.

Thursday, March 28. Nothing special today; nothing but water. Many are sick; Gunther and Volker suffer a lot. The rest of us are holding our own. Even though it was rainy and windy, we were up on deck the whole day. Hopefully it won't get any worse.

Friday, March 29. In the afternoon the sun is finally out. We were out on the deck, but unfortunately, Gunther and Volker are still feeling pretty sick. Rüdiger appears to be in the best shape, but we're all eating very little now, even the 3 of us who are not too seasick. Heinz and I went to the movies in the evening. Except for the bad air, it was good. Today the wind speed is at 8, the ocean has whitecaps, but we can't really look too much. Slowly we're getting used to this weird life on board. There are about 1,160 passengers on the ship. The clocks get turned back another hour.

Saturday, March 30. Another day further along and again I'm lying in my bed, 2nd level bunk, and my thoughts drift to all of you. The weather was so-so today, but we still spent the entire day on deck. I did not feel very well in the morning, and already saw myself holding a bag. But I swallowed hard and with a lot of energy and willpower I went upstairs where I then began to feel better. We have already made some very nice acquaintances. Especially one other couple, he is from Danzig, she is from Hamburg and also my bunk neighbor. In addition, there is a young girl from Dusseldorf. Since yesterday she is suffering from the flu and is in the infirmary. It's nothing too serious, but a bit of a relief for us two women because the girl is by herself. She is usually being care for by a tall thin Negro who studied medicine in Geneva. He takes excellent care of her and us. In the morning and afternoon he serves us a wonderful cup of coffee. Otherwise we eat in the so-called cafeteria with an unbelievable number of other people which is very noisy and with only self-service. Gunther and Volker are feeling a bit better and Rüdiger is very spry. We are about a third way into our ocean crossing.

Sunday, March 31. It is not a very nice day. Except for a few minutes, it is continuing to rain and storm. The ship is pitching and tossing and we don't know where to go. Except for the large day room, there really is only the deck. Even though there are a lot of passengers, there is quite a mix of people – only a few Germans, but a lot of Polish people, Czechs, and Slovaks. The crew is Americans and Negros. Gunther is feeling a little better today, but poor Volker is still suffering quite a bit. I am better myself. Tonight Heinz and I, together with the other couple, will watch a very interesting film about the creation and formation of America. One cigarette on the windy deck concludes this day. The clock is being turned back another hour tonight.

Monday, April 1. Each day is the same. An icy wind greets us on deck and continues all day. Even our little Rüdiger became ill today. The three of them have hardly eaten anything these past few days. The adults are taking this bustle a little more in stride and with a sense of humor, “is all ‘nen Övergang”. Tonight it's off to the movies again, which is really our only diversion. Even though they offer quite a bit of entertainment, usually three-fourths of the crowd is teenagers and such, and that really does not appeal to us. So, we usually sit around in a foursome and poke fun and talk about this cruise.

Wednesday, April 3, in the afternoon. I was not able to write last night because we talked too long and the lights were turned off. Yesterday, finally the sun was shining and we could go out on deck. The ocean was calm, azure in color with small whitecaps – it was wonderful. Last night the clock was turned back yet another hour. Rüdiger had a children's party yesterday afternoon and came back beaming and with a variety of gifts. The rest of us watched a very good movie yesterday evening “Alle Herrlichkeit auf Erden”. We had already seen the movie in

Hersfeld in German, but we were again very impressed. Here, of course, all movies are shown in English. You get used to the mumbling and slowly begin to understand more.

Thursday, April 4, early. Yesterday was not a nice day, indeed. Beginning in the early morning hours, we noticed a very heavy pitching and tossing of the ship, worse than it had been with wind speeds of 10. The waves sprayed higher than buildings and all decks were closed. Terrible! Finally, around 2 pm the storm subsided, but the weather remained bad. In the afternoon we received our finally entry visas and our disembarkation papers for the USA. Because of the continually bad weather, we'll probably not arrive on time. Last evening was the big farewell party. All five of us (including Gunther) sat together and secretly gossiped and made fun of everything. After that, I was not able to write any more. The clocked was turned back another hour.

Thursday, April 4, evening. Even though it was cold, the sun was finally out again. All of us, including the other couple, spent all morning on deck. In the afternoon we goofed around, and in the evening it was off to another movie. Tomorrow evening we should arrive in New York with a 10 hour delay because of the bad weather. We study the other women in our sleeping quarters, some of whom are making the wildest plans for their arrival in this cosmopolitan city.

Friday, April 5. Bad weather again; it's drizzling and heavy fog in the afternoon. The fog horn is constantly blowing. Around 6 PM we are about 150 miles from New York. We were bored the entire day.

Saturday, April 6. We got up around 4 AM! Around 5:30 AM we passed Long Island. We were very happy to see land again, America! Soon we are greeted by the Statue of Liberty and this cosmopolitan city awoke before our eyes in a veil of mist and rain. The sight of the sprawling buildings, the enormous harbor and the wide roads was overwhelming. Then came hours of waiting and paperwork until we were able to disembark. We entered a huge customs hall, but despite the large number of people, everything went pretty quickly and without incident. Our containers all had arrived as well. We had to open them and then close them up again. Then it was time to say good bye to the friends we had become fond of. Our organization provided us with the tickets and plans for our continuing journey. We continued by bus, first through Manhattan, New York, then with the ferry across the Hudson River to the train station in New Jersey. Busses and cars drove directly onto the platforms which were devoid of any people. The individual compartments are large, with reclining seats all in a row. We saw the Statue of Liberty again with her burning flame and then we were off around 6:40 PM. By now we have been through Philadelphia and Baltimore and are heading toward Chicago where we have to change trains. This has been a very long and tiring day. My four men are all asleep. The clock is being turned back another hour.

Sunday, April 7. We slept a little, went through Youngstown and arrived in Chicago around midday. Approximately 3 hours outside of Chicago it started to snow and we went through the deepest winter landscape. These wide-open spaces are enormous even here in the East where the population is supposed to be pretty dense. The landscape is flat, few trees, and many rivers. Everything had been organized for us in Chicago as well. It's a good thing; otherwise we wouldn't have known what to do. Travel is different here. For example, when you pass through a train station you very seldom see a sign indicating what city it is. I haven't figured out yet how

people know when to get off the train. In Chicago we went by cab to another train station and there got on the infamous “Pullman cars”. They don’t have any numbered platforms either. Because of the many private train companies, the individual trains are identified through the company’s name and number. Right now we are in the Santa Fe No.1, which left the city around 4 PM. You really have to experience these trains, otherwise, you can’t imagine them. Soft carpets cover the floor, the seats can be adjusted in 3 different positions and a server (Negro) comes in through constantly and picks up paper and puts hats into hatboxes (without having to be asked). The washrooms are magnificent. They are approximately 3 x 2 meters in size (toilette in a separate room), with 2 sinks, vanity, chair and other luxuries. The doors between the individual cars open and close automatically. It’s impossible for me to describe everything; soft music is also playing while I write. I have not yet had an opportunity buy a stamp or to find a mailbox, even though the brochure indicates there should be one on the train. Tomorrow morning I will try and find it. Around 7 PM we crossed the Mississippi, but unfortunately it was already dark. The buildings are very different here. Compared to the sky scrapers in the big city, these are mostly singly family homes and, even though there is a big car in front of almost every house, they appear very plain. After leaving Chicago, we have come through the states of Illinois, Iowa and Missouri, as well as through Kansas City.

Monday, April 8. This Morning we are greeted by brilliant sunshine and the wide open spaces of Oklahoma and Texas. The distances are without end, which is exciting for me, but could be depressing for some. The towns all look like they do in the cowboy movies. Small wooden houses, huge silos and factories, and cars everywhere. In the designated reading compartment we look through a brochure about Phoenix – “the town in the sun”. If only half of what we see in the pictures is true, then I’m excited. I’ll have to send everyone postcards because everything

is so very different from “old Germany” and mere descriptions will not be adequate. Desert landscape continues in New Mexico. Our first longer break is in Clovis. The clock is being turned back another hour, which means we arrived in Clovis around 11:30 AM and will depart at 10:50 AM. Around 2 PM the landscape begins to change again. Following the wide open spaces we now see canyon-like sandstone mountains and sparse vegetation. This is the landscape where Disney filmed his movie “*Die Wüste Lebt*”. Magnificent in every way. I stayed in the observation compartment until 6 PM and can hardly describe what kept me there. The sight of the sandstone canyons changed from deeply fissured to wild and steep and partly covered with snow. IN between is the flat desert landscape with dried out riverbeds. For the kids, of course, the highlights are the Indian reservations. I even saw two men with long hair, their black ponytails tied with white ribbons. The houses, or better shacks, are very flat with roof hanging lower than the side walls, built out of mud and sand. The contrasts in this region between this indescribable primeval landscape and the most modern American cars that drive through this desert are almost grotesque. Now we have arrived in Arizona. The sunset was tropical, meaning that the sun went down in minutes and in a few more minutes there was complete darkness.

Tuesday, April 9. Last evening we had to change trains in Ash Fork around 9:40 PM. We were thirsty and a cab, which was free because the driver was employed by the train company, drove us into town, which had a modern Wild West characteristic. I can’t describe this for me very foreign milieu any differently. Around midnight we boarded the train again and spent our third night on the train. This morning we saw Arizona in the rising sunlight. The landscape is about the same as yesterday, but the earth must get a bit more water. We saw cacti, green trees and a lot of unknown and in their size grotesque appearing plants, but at least small yellow and blue

flowers were also blooming. We had a wonderful breakfast in the dining cart and were now anxiously awaiting your final destination. Our first impressions were of the beautiful palm trees and the wonderfully wide roads. Around 8:30 am we arrived in Phoenix and got off the train very exhausted yet happy to finally be in the city and the land of the sun.