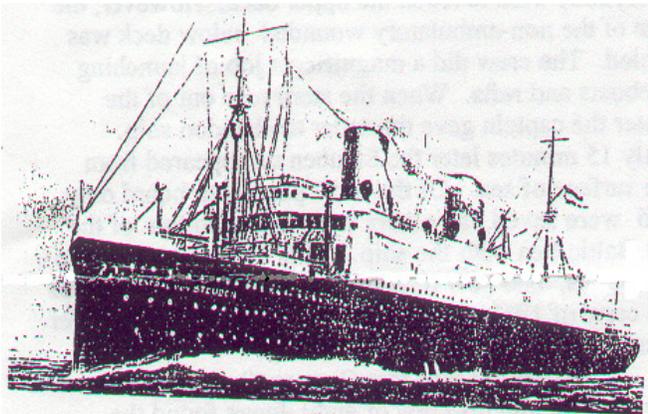


# A Bittersweet Reminder

By Frank Schmidt

*A nostalgic recollection of an Atlantic crossing by an 11 year old boy in June 1933 on the good ship General von Steuben, the tragic fate of this vessel in February 1945, and the discovery of the wreck at the bottom of the Baltic Sea in September 2002.*



**The General von Steuben as she looked in 1933 before her hull was painted white and she became a cruise ship**

In an heroic attempt to save some of the civilian population of Germany's eastern provinces grand-Admiral Karl Doenitz speedily reactivated some passenger ships that were laid up during the war and used them to transport civilian women and children, Red Cross nurses and wounded German soldiers to the West to save them from a fate worse than death at the hands of the advancing Soviet troops.

In the English-speaking world little is known of the three most catastrophic sinkings by Soviet submarines, which had stayed in their bases during much of World War II, but finally ventured into enemy waters in the closing months of that war when the Soviet Army had occupied much of the territory bordering the Baltic Sea. They sank a number of unarmed German refugee ships, including the Wilhelm Gustloff, the Goya and the Steuben.

On January 30, 2003, I was reminded that 58 years ago the Wilhelm Gustloff, a former cruise ship, with 6,600 women, children, red Cross nurses and German wounded soldiers on board was sunk by a Soviet submarine under the command of Captain III Class Alexandr Marinesko. 5,343 people went down with the ship. The sinking of this ship accounts for the greatest single loss of life of any marine disaster in the history of mankind, but due to media silence, this is practically unknown in the western world. The second largest was when the Goya was sunk

in the Gulf of Danzig only days before the end of the war. The third was the Steuben, which was sunk off the coast of what was then still German Pomerania on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 1945.

The Steuben, originally named General von Steuben in honor of the German officer who trained American troops at Valley Forge during the American War of Independence to underscore the close ties German people had with America over the centuries. This ship is of special interest to me because in June of 1933 she brought me, my mother and younger brother from Cuxhaven in Germany to New York City. For an inquisitive youngster who had never been more than 20 kilometers from his home, this was a great adventure. I had, of course, never been on a ship before, but during the 10 day voyage I got to see most of the ship due to a kindly purser who took the time to show me places not normally accessible to passengers.

One of the first places he showed me was the engine room. I was impressed by the great power of the huge engines that turned the driveshaft and the propellers, and was astounded by their untiring effort to propel the ship across the vastness of the ocean. The fuel was probably coal, but the engine room was very clean and gleaming in what seemed to be a new coat of paint. Nowhere was there coal dust to be seen.

We also visited the kitchen where meals were being prepared. Here the purser gave me a banana, something I had never seen before. He saw that I was puzzled and told me to peel it and eat the inside. That was my introduction to bananas.

On another day he led me to the bridge where I met the captain and some of the ship's officers, all dressed in natty uniforms. The bridge, with its big compass and other instruments, was very impressive and I got a good view of the wide ocean before us. When the helmsman let me hold the tiller with him, it made my day. I felt that I was steering this huge ship over the endless ocean that lay before my very eyes. This was a great thrill and will remain in my memory as long as I live.

Although we were not immigrants to the USA, but were in transit to Canada, we still had to be processed on Ellis Island. After a couple of days we were on our way to Canada. When our bus crossed the Rainbow Bridge at Niagara Falls, Ontario, the carillon bells in the Peace Tower were chiming. Although I knew better, I imag-