

*...Reminder continued from page 11*

ined that they rang just for us. What a beautiful welcome to our new country. In a short time we arrived in Toronto, our final destination, where we were welcomed by my father who had come to Canada in 1929. That was the beginning of a new life for me.

Much larger and faster German passenger ships like the Bremen and Europa could cross the Atlantic in half the time and soon the older and slower ships were taken off the trans-Atlantic run. The General von Steuben's hull was painted white and she became one of the 12 cruise ships owned or leased by the German Labor Front to take German workers on holidays at nominal cost to destinations in the Mediterranean and the fjords of Norway. These ships were not allowed to dock in England lest the army of unemployed British workers learn the truth of conditions in Germany.

Cruises for working people began in pre-war Germany and did not become commonplace in other countries until well after the war. Contrary to the rest of the world at that time, there was full employment in Germany. What's more, workers received two weeks vacation with pay, something unheard of in much of the world. As I distinctly recall, this was at a time when I saw dejected and hungry unemployed men lining up at soup kitchens in Toronto for sustenance. The line-ups sometimes stretched around a city block.

Due to the US president Roosevelt's belligerent stance toward Germany, the ship's name was shortened to Steuben in 1938. In September 1939, Britain and France declared war on Germany, thus turning a local border dispute into a world war. The cruises were terminated and the ships either became mobile residences for German naval personnel in training along the Baltic Coast or, like the Steuben, served as auxiliary hospital ships that transported German wounded soldiers from the Gulf of Riga to hospitals in the west. In the fall of 1944, she was reactivated by Grand Admiral Karl Doenitz and put in service to rescue German civilians from the clutches of the advancing Soviets, in what became the most far-reaching "ethnic cleansing" of people in the history of Europe, that was initiated and sanctioned by the Allies.

On February 9, 1945 the Steuben, under the command of Captain Wilhelm Petersen, left Pillau in West Prussia with 4,657 refugees, mostly women and children on board, as well as a large contingent of nurses and wounded soldiers. After safely passing through a minefield, the captain set course for Kiel in Schleswig-Holstein which they would reach by next evening.

There was indescribable misery on board. Every deck

was filled to overflowing. Many of the passengers were wounded or sick German soldiers. Most could not help themselves and the medical personnel could only give perfunctory attention to those in dire need.

The ship's officers had their hands full, guiding the ship through dangerous waters in the middle of the night. Just before midnight the Steuben passed over the spot where the Wilhelm Gustloff was torpedoed just two weeks before, but the passengers knew nothing about that incident. After midnight the crew breathed a sigh of relief because no enemy submarine had yet been sighted west of that point.

Unknown to the crew, Soviet submarine S-3 under Captain Alexandr Marinesko was lurking in the dark in wait for German refugee ships. He had sent the Wilhelm Gustloff to the bottom just two weeks before and hoped to sink another ship, which would qualify him as a Hero of the Soviet Union.

At 0.56 hrs on February 10, two Soviet torpedoes tore a big hole in the ship and she immediately began to list to starboard. The captain tried desperately to beach the Steuben on the nearby Pomeranian coast, but to no avail. The ship was sinking too fast. There was panic on board and everybody tried to reach the upper deck. However, the fate of the non-ambulatory wounded below deck was sealed. The crew did a magnificent job of launching lifeboats and rafts. When the stern rose out of the water, the captain gave the order to abandon ship. Only 15 minutes later, the Steuben disappeared from the surface of the sea. Of the 4,657 people on board only 656 were saved, the others went to the bottom of the icy Baltic Sea with the ship. This vessel, once a ship of dreams, had now turned into a coffin. Was any of the crew of 1933 on board? Unfortunately, I will never know.

I recently read that German diver Ulrich Restemeyer and his crew of eight divers found the wreck of the Steuben on the bottom of the Baltic Sea in September 2002. She lies at a depth of 23 meters, just 23 nautical miles off in what used to be German Pomerania. She is apparently covered with fishermen's nets that have snagged on her rusting hulk. The site has been declared a German war cemetery. May the souls of those perished with her rest in peace, a peace that was denied them in their lifetime.

The General von Steuben played an unforgettable part in my life for I was that 11-year-old boy she transported across the Atlantic when there was still peace in the world. I shall never forget her, her kindly crew, or those who perished with her in darkness of the Baltic Sea so many years ago. ❀