

The Parnu Passengers
By Carrie-Ann Smith

“A man dashes across the railroad tracks. An ordinary man, a factory worker in a monty-shirt. Gently but firmly, he clutches a small bundle to his chest. This takes place in the Freeport of Malmo, Sweden. From behind a black mountain of coal, a white ambulance appears on the scene and speeds to the harbourside, stopping abruptly on the railroad tracks that run along the quay. Doors are opened and the white clad ambulance attendants, carry a stretcher bearing a young woman towards the boat. Her anxious gaze surveys the scene of women, children and men who wait on the quay. Her eyes light up and she smiles as she sees the man holding the bundle. The woman comes directly from giving birth at the local maternity hospital and the man is her husband who protects their 24 hr old infant from the cold ocean winds. By the quay is moored a small white (gray) vessel the "Parnu". It is a small refugee boat which will begin its journey across the Atlantic.”

So began an article published in the Swedish newspaper Aftonbladet on July 23rd, 1949. The article was translated and donated to the Pier 21 Society by Kristi V. Allpere. She emailed us initially looking for information on the arrival of the Parnu. Around here we refer to the Parnu as one of the “little boats”; small vessels that brought illegal refugees from the Baltic States, via Sweden, to Canada between 1947 and 1949. Nine arrived in total with seven calling at Pier 21. Since the illegal arrivals were well documented and covered by local newspapers we have much information to offer interested parties, but in the case of the Parnu we have an extraordinary photo collection that was donated by Joseph Lajko-Tackas. I attached a few of the digital images to my reply and Kristi responded immediately saying that she was in the photographs.

So how did six year old Kristi, the photographer Joseph and the new parents all come to be crossing the North Atlantic on a tiny vessel bound for a country that might not even let them in?



Kristi on the far left with a bow in her hair

All were refugees who fled the Russians during the war years, moving from the Baltic States to Sweden where most, by this time, had been living for up to seven years. They had secured employment and begun new lives when the threat resurfaced – the Soviets were pressuring the Swedish government to return the Baltic refugees. In the Aftonbladet article a Parnu passenger explained:

"What my name is, is not important and how I look at this moment, you need not write about either, because that also is not important. I just want to speak for the 200 (actually 154) people here who are passengers on the "Parnu". I hope that you will try to understand us. We lived well here in Sweden. We cannot imagine that it could be any better anywhere else in the world. We are grateful for all the help we have been given by this country and its people. BUT, we cannot stay any longer. We do not want to fall into the hands of our enemy, we do not want to live through another war!"

He continued by describing the propaganda offensive and the materials which the Russians had printed in Sweden. He spoke about letters from the Russian Embassy to refugees whose addresses were all over Sweden. He stated that he moved from one



apartment to another in Stockholm hoping to evade detection by the Soviets. A few later he left the city bound for the port of Malmo and the Parnu. Two days after his arrival in Malmo, he received a letter from the Russian Embassy inviting him to return to his homeland. Recently, he explains, some known Soviet agents were seen in the port city. They were spotted quickly, but the incident caused much anxiety and panic amongst the refugees who were planning to sail across the Atlantic. This was the reason for the direct and speedy drive of our new parents from the Hospital to the harbourside quay.

Most of the "little boats" were purchased and sailed by the passengers themselves. Kristi wrote, "Many of the men had sea experience from their Baltic lives and helped to run the ship. In command was Captain Suksdorf."

The Parnu sailed into Halifax Harbour on August 2, 1949 with the Estonian Flag flying high. Most of the refugees arrived without visas and were held in Pier 21's detention quarters, where they lived until their papers could be cleared and their backgrounds checked. In the end only a few were denied admission. Within a month or so the Parnu passengers separated and set off to assorted destinations and their new lives.



In August of 1999, while Pier 21's new incarnation as a museum was just one month old, many of the passengers of the Parnu assembled in

Captain Suksdorf on the Parnu's Flying Deck

Vancouver for a fifty year reunion. Mr. Joseph Lajko-Tackas was not there but thanks to his new friendship with Kristi he will be next time. 154 people sailed on the Parnu each with a war story and an escape story. For the lucky ones an immigration story followed and life in a country where they never had to fear the arrival of a letter or a midnight knock on the door.