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Estonian Displaced  
Person  
Atlantic  
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OUR SEA JOURNEY TO FREEDOM ACROSS THE ATLANTIC,  
ON THE SAILING SHIP "ATLANTIC"

August the 19th, 1994, is a very important date in my life. It was forty-six years ago when we landed on Canada's east coast in our relatively small sailing vessel, the Atlanta. The Atlanta had originally belonged to the Norwegians and had previously sailed across the open seas. The overall length of the Atlanta was 86' 4; its length at the water line measured 59' 0; it had a draft of 12' 5 5/8. The hull was of genuine mahogany, and the deck of spruce. The main mast stood 82' high and the mizzenmast was 56' tall. In our opinion, the Atlanta was a truly magnificent sailing craft.

We were Estonians by birth, who had managed to escape in the fall of 1944 across the Baltic Sea from our native land, before Stalin's savage Red Army engulfed us completely. Most of us had lived and worked in neutral Sweden approximately four years. Soon, however, our safety was being threatened. Stalin's NKVD or GPU worked everywhere in Sweden in order to entice the refugee's home, even promising to forgive their "sins". Not surprisingly, even today we are considered traitors by the Russian Communists. In order to placate the Soviet government's demands, Sweden, to its great shame, finally yielded to the Soviet request and surrendered 147 Balts. This betrayal constituted a turning point in our lives. We had to decide quickly about finding a safe country, where we could begin our lives anew. In 1948 there were few countries which would accept poor refugees. Therefore, we were forced to find an alternative solution.

To begin with, we saved almost every penny we earned. Soon there were 16-20 people who pooled their money together. We hoped to buy a boat and sail to America. Finally, we had 38 people, each of whom contributed \$4000.00 kronor toward the purchase of our boat. The people who shared our dream, came from different parts of Estonia. Our Captain, Eugen Kommissar came from Parnu, a beautiful harbour and resort town in Estonia. He had his seaman's papers and the experience of being on active sea duty during the war. And thus it was, on a beautiful sunny day, when we said farewell to Sweden, a country that had generally treated us well. It was a touching moment as we boarded

our white boat, glittering on the wave of the Baltic. Since we were strangers, our first concern was to introduce each other. I have to say, in retrospect, that our new family was in good spirits and shared an optimistic disposition. The sea was calm as we cast off and we hardly noticed the shoreline receding. The Captain issued instructions, and we were finally on our way, heading out to the vast open sea.

Soon the cliffs disappeared and [our] only point of reference remained the tower of the Lyseki church, far away on the horizon. A strong wind began blowing, which meant that many of us would get seasick quite soon.

20 June

Our first morning on the open sea. Someone is offering food and tea with lemon. Our Atlanta is moving along smoothly with the help of the motor. We are quite pleased when one of our fellow travellers brings out his accordion and begins to play.

But we soon learn that the ocean is very changeable. In no time at all high waves raise the ship to great heights and toss it down again. I cannot get my breath. It is a frightening sensation. Ironically, we are experiencing our first storm, before we even get started. It's unbelievable.

The Captain orders the Atlanta to turn in to the next harbour, where we can get a little rest and wait till daybreak. In the morning we are in a Norwegian fishing village 4 km from Kristian Sund.

June 21

The shoreline of the Norwegian coast is very beautiful. Having recovered, we are quite a jolly bunch, who now meet with the Norwegian Customs' Officer. He wants to know who we are and the Captain gives him a list of names; the Officer seems satisfied. It turns out he was only interested if there were any Swedish people on board; we do not count. Apparently, there are different rules for the Swedes. He is a nice chap who wants to hear our songs and we sing to him. Next day he brings us newspapers and some Swedish money. We proudly sing, standing at attention our Estonian National Anthem.

June 22

Morning. We are waiting to leave the harbour. The local villagers are very kind and bring us home-made bread and delicious fish. They wish us a safe passage and stand they're waving, as we pull away.

June 23

The Captain tells us, that our ship is having a 'real run' which in seaman's language means it is making 6.5 knots. All of us are happy. If everything goes well, we should be in Portland, England in no time at all.

June 24

It is St. John's Day, that is, Midsummer Eve. One of our humorous companions tells funny stories and passes around a bottle of cheer. Pretty soon everybody is sitting on the deck and enjoying the sun and the calm sea. Mrs. V. is sewing an Estonian flag, (blue, black and white tricolour), which we will soon require. For lunch we are feasting on potato soup, while our ship is sailing along nicely. We are waiting to catch sight of the English shore. Many ships are passing us: we have counted eleven ships of all shapes and sizes.

At 6:15 a.m. the Captain is ceremoniously raising our new Estonian flag. We proudly sing our National Anthem, standing at attention, of course. Meanwhile the photographer is taking a few pictures; all the while our flag is waving nicely in the sea breeze.

June 25

A beautiful morning at sea. The sun is shining and the waves sparkle like crystal. We are sailing with the help of the motor, because there is not enough wind. All the family is in good spirits, for tomorrow we should see the shores of England.

June 26

Night was calm. The motor is working monotonously. The famous White Cliffs of Dover are not far. O my, so many ships! A thick fog rolls in every 3 minutes; our Captain has to use our ship's horn. All of a sudden I see a huge tourist liner. How nice it would be to be travelling on a ship like that. Our hopes of sighting the Cliffs of Dover disappear. The wind is increasing very fast: our ship is only rocking back and forth in the waves, hardly making any headway. Lunch is made by Tiiu. Her pea soup and pancakes taste excellent, despite our predicament.

June 27

We are now in the English Channel and the wind is blowing against our ship. The waves are very strong; even the deck is wet. We are in poor

spirits. But it is very interesting to be on the sea first hand. At last our Captain manages to maneuver the ship into an inlet.

June 28

We arrive in the harbour of Portland. The sea is in a terrible turmoil; the storm is raging. Luckily we have escaped safely. We begin to clean up ship. All the suitcases and linen with blanket have to be cleaned and aired. Everyone is sorting out their little belongings. After lunch we hold a meeting because one of our club members is relinquishing his duty. The meeting goes well and everybody returns to his or her own sleeping quarters, except our Captain, of course. Her remains on duty.

June 29

We are on the move again. We pass some green fields, some forests, and very nice summer homes. Suddenly the wind is picking up. It feels like being on a swing. In the evening our Captain tells us to be ready for one of them. Our ship is now sailing with our flag at full mast. Nobody recognizes the colours of our flag any more. That night we sleep in the harbour, except for the Captain and a couple of seamen. In the morning the Custom's Officer comes on board. He takes our passports and the list of the names. The Customs Officers are kind but still our boat has to be moved, because there is too much traffic. All around us there are all sizes and colours of ships; a fantastic view.

July 1

We have permission to go on shore. Our currency consisting of dollars, pennies or pounds, everything has to be counted. The men want a drink of whiskey; the long awaited drink.

July 2

We are told that our Swedish Kronors are no good in the bank. That is too bad, because only a few of us have English pounds. The most important thing is that our Captain has to wait for sea journey's map; without it we cannot continue.

July 3

Day in England, Weymouth. For the first time we ride in a double decker bus, which is open. The tree branches brush our heads. We see fancy hotels and beautiful beaches. The Cafés are full of tourists. Fruit stands are filled with fruits and vegetables. Such abundance. We are looking

forward to a warm bath and finally finding a hotel where we can get a bath. Bravo!

July 4

The rain is falling steadily and it is very windy. It looks as if there might be a storm again. However, our spirits are still good. The accordion is playing and the card playing foursome are on the go again. We had coffee this morning; boy, it was delicious! It is still raining. We are doing some exercises to keep in shape.

July 5

All of us are working. Our potatoes are germinating and that has to be stopped. Four of our group are still in town for last minute shopping. The harbour is full of American flags because it is their Independence Day. For some reason, all the men have decided to shave their heads. Terrible!

July 6

The morning is very quiet. There is no sign of the promised maps and the Captain is getting impatient. In the afternoon we have visitors. The natives bring whiskey, cigarettes and want to buy cameras and watches.

July 7

Good news. We have our maps. All aboard! We take water at 16:00 and we are off. Our flag is raised and waving in the wind. We have some people on the quai looking at our departing sailing vessel. The Captain and two first mates are working feverishly. The horizon disappears quite fast and we are once again on the open water. In the evening we have a party; lots of fun. One poor fellow has to be tied up to the mast like the legendary Odysseus. Not because he wants to hear the mermaids singing, but because he is too drunk to stand up.

July 12

It is a heavenly morning on the ocean. After coffee we put on our bathing suits and enjoy the sun over a long period of time. (Sweden has hardly any sunny days). Lunch consists of herring with potatoes and cream of wheat for desert. We have a choir and there is no end to songs, including a new one from the Captain (innovated). Our spirits are quite high.

July 13

Exactly at 15:00 in the afternoon we bid farewell to the last of Europe, a cape called Vincent. We sing patriotic songs and pray for a safe journey to the new land. It is a sad and unforgettable moment in our lives. One Dutch big ship passed us as we set our course to Las Palmas, the Canary Islands.

18 July - Las Palmas. A beautiful southern city in the middle of the ocean. The sun is very strong and our ship board "family" is in good spirits. The merchants are all over our vessel. They all want something from us and sell us bananas, grapes, oranges, etc.

A lunch, consisting of fresh fish with fresh potatoes and tomatoes tastes delicious in the warm climate. We notice that life in this small city is quite hectic. The ladies wear beautiful, expensive and colourful outfits. Amazing! Sailing boats can be seen all over the place. There is hardly any room for us. Soon we learn that the Catholics have their church festival and a big religious procession is on the way. The music sounds different and strange to our ears. Soon we have a visitor, namely a Swedish lady, who lives here. She is happy to speak Swedish again after such a long time. She takes us to her villa, which is like something out of a fairytale. We are speechless. The air on the island is dry and easy to breathe. It never rains here. People are noisy and happy.

July 19

The police do not want us in this harbour any longer. It is time for us to leave. This time we will cross the Atlantic Ocean. May God preserve us! Soon the horizon is disappearing once again and the vast waves are caressing our little home. We are surrounded by the endless sound of the deep and mysterious ocean.

Our Captain, Mr. Eugen Kommissar gives us our first English lesson, since he is fluent in English. Those interested gather around him on the deck, even though the sun is unbearably hot. It seems that only a few of us can tolerate the sun. The others have to move below. Surprisingly, there is no wind whatsoever. The men folk have constructed a makeshift canvas sack for showers. They are working hard lifting pails of sea water for the shower. One fellow is such an eager water puller, that he loses the pail and almost his balance. Luckily somebody rescues him in time. It serves as a good lesson for everybody.

July 30

It is the hottest day at sea. There is not a single breeze. We are standing still in the ocean; no wind, no sailing. We are unable to prepare food, because the smell of the petroleum stove would be just too much in this

heat. Only a few strong ones can work in the kitchen. We no longer take turns. The Captain continues to teach English. The cook has discovered that our water tank (the very last one) has been leaking. Now our water has to be rationed. In the morning we get black tea for breakfast. The men give their portion to the women. We are in the open sea. Not a single boat is visible. We only see flying blue coloured marlins.

August 13

Thus the days disappear in the enormous heat, with hardly any wind for the sails. Our Captain makes a decision to sail for the Island of Bermuda, because we need to replenish our drinking water. In the morning we see the shores of this island in the distance. It is very stormy; our boat bobs like a cork in the high waves. At seven o'clock the Captain sees [a] lighthouse beam. We will make it.

August 14

However, our happiness is short-lived. Now we are reaching some sort of shallows. We just have to turn back to the open sea. Fate, it seems, does not want us to land on this island. Water has to be rationed, since we still have 7-8 days left before reaching the Canadian shore. Still, it appears that our prayers have been answered, for suddenly we have a strong wind and our ship almost flies between the waves. In the evening we see black clouds and it suddenly begins to rain. Heaven be blessed. Now we are running with mugs to collect the rainwater from the sails. We obtain 2-3 little containers filled with rainwater to make tea, or porridge. The men folk work strenuously to get the ship on the right course, because the Captain did not have the map to the Island, hence, we have ended up on the wrong side of the Island.

August 15

Today we have a strong wind and we are making good headway. Everybody is very serious. The Captain tells us to take out our winter clothes. It is getting cold.

August 17

The ship is moving too fast. The situation is very serious because of the rough sea. At least we are heading in the right direction, the Captain assures us. Some of the women are praying loudly.

August 18

We finally see land in the distance. It must be St. Johns, New Brunswick, a little harbour town. Now we have to be ready for whatever awaits us after this long journey in a little sailing vessel. The harbour is filled with people. There are also reporters and photographers. Cigarettes, oranges are thrown to us, and later, milk is brought for the four children on board. The Customs Officer is very surprised to discover that instead of an American tourist boat they have 42 Estonians who have made the life threatening journey over the ocean, fleeing from Stalin's terror. It is a marvelous feeling to step on solid ground after two months on the sea.

Looking back, I feel that given the same circumstances, I can say with certainty that the 42 Estonians would not hesitate again, to journey again across the perilous waters in the quest for freedom.