

The boat used to cross the Baltic Sea from Latvija to Sweden was owned by Mikels Kesteris

Passengers were: (Total of 14)

Andrejs Pukulis* - brother of Jekabs Pukulis
(no spouse)

↓
husband of Ilze Pukulis
Kesteris
(sister of Jekabs
Pukulis)

Ilze Kesteris* - sister of Jekabs Pukulis

Mikels Kesteris - Husband

Andris Kesteris - Son

Jekabs Pukulis*

Ilze Pukulis - Wife

Biruta (Ruth) Pukulis - Daughter

← Grampa, Gramma
c Ruthie

Janis Alps

Karlis Drejs

Mrs. Drejs

Mr. Vitolds

Mr. Vitolds Daughter-in-law

2 other young men

- Brothers and Sister

* This diary was written
by Ilze Kesteris

It was October 10, 1944, when we left the shores of our beloved homeland, Latvia. In a hurry that last evening and from my father's home, we bid our farewells to my dear mother and others that had come to see us off. Parting was so difficult as I watched my mother crying....not knowing if we were ever to return to this home and our homeland. Tears were falling and my heart was aching as I carried little Andy who was sleeping soundly, down to the shore. In haste, we boarded the boat in preparation to leave our dear homeland for an unknown fate. Once on board, I felt somewhat calmed and prayed that the Lord would have his way with us.

The engines engaged and we started to move to a land where there was no war and where people happily lived in peace. The men remained on deck while the women and children settled in the small quarters below. It was the place where we felt the strong seas, experienced sea sickness and comforted the little ones when they awoke crying and vomiting.

We had only gone a little way, when the men sensed the presence of a caravan of boats travelling without lights on as we were and heading toward Liepaja. Immediately, our men turned the boat heading to shore. Below, we had no idea of what was happening on deck. The boat was fighting the heavy seas and I feared that the waves were going to break the boat into small pieces. We cried and once again prayed that God would protect and save us. Shortly thereafter, it appeared that we were in calmer waters as the men had turned the boat back to the direction we should be heading in. The flotilla of boats had passed without detecting us and we were fortunate to have evaded a potential catastrophe. Our men cautiously watched on deck as the boat continued and suddenly noticed the silhouette of another boat. Once again, we were undetected as we moved further away from Latvia's shores.

That night passed and when morning came, the seas were calm and the fog was very thick around us. Now we could watch and look for that sought shoreGotland. Because the fog was so thick and seeing anything was impossible... to our regret, it appeared that we had lost our way and missed our goal. There was nothing left but to continue further and seek Eland or possibly even the shores of Sweden itself. The hours were ticking by and the day of October 11th was coming to an end. The waves are large and I asked my brother, Andrejs if you can fish in these kinds of waves. He laughs and says that this is not considered a storm to any fisherman. My heart felt a little better from that remark; consequently, the three wives, Ruth and Andy sat out on the deck... our health had improved and the sea sickness had passed. Even so, I was not hungry and neither were the other wives or the little ones, except for the men who did not suffer from sea sickness.

We rejoice at the sign of blue water as this means that we have left the dangerous waters of the sea. Even so, I feel sad and the tears flow as I know now that we are further away from my homeland and dear mother. The men are now measuring the depth of the water we are in. The fog is thick and shore is nowhere to be seen. The measurement shows 26 fathoms and now we are all happy because that shows we are getting closer to shore. The day has ended and we have travelled some distance again.

The men measure the depth again because they are afraid of the boat hitting rocks that appear near shore and they had been told that the shoreline is very rocky. Everyone is surprised by a measurement of 50 fathoms. Faith is lost that we are nearing land, thoughts are confused and fear that we will run out of fuel and a storm will overtake us and the bottom of the sea will be our grave. Once again, we pray to God that he would keep us safe and direct our boat towards land. At this point, none of us know where we are or where we are heading. We believe that we are completely lost. Travelling a little further and observing our surroundings, fortune would have it that the men notice a small light through the fog. This brings everyone much joy as they believe it is Eland's lighthouse beam. Once again, the depth is measured and found to be 6 fathoms. Now the anchor is thrown out and we settled in to get some rest as we know the shore is close by.

On the morning of October 12th, we see the light but the fog is thick as seldom seen. The boat heads slowly towards shore and when we saw land the men took another depth measurement...2 fathoms. Nothing else can be done but to drop the anchor and wait for the fog to lift because the shore is too rocky to maneuver safely. When the fog lifted, we spotted a small boat with a man at the oars. We were so excited and tried to get his attention by shouting and waving a handkerchief at him. He slowly started to approach us when he noticed the boat with people in it. He must have been afraid and motioned with his arms for us to go south. Keeping the boat close to

2

shore, we continued until we saw some people on shore and several border guards who proceeded to shout some questions at us. The boat was stopped and the men raised a white kerchief. A small boat with 3 border guards approached us and asked where we were from and if we had any weapons. We were relieved to know that we were in safe hands and after all the travel, we had reached shore. We anchored our boat and were brought to shore by a smaller boat. There we were met by immigration guards who granted us temporary documentation.

A large auto arrived and the women and children were instructed to board and here began our first travel in a safe place with no storms of war. We travelled the graveled country roads and noticed the stone fences, small well-kept homes, nicely painted with curtains on the windows and the people appeared nicely dressed. It left us with a good impression. The auto stopped at a country church where we were invited in to rest. The auto went back to pick up our men. By the time they arrived, the local people had prepared a meal that we never expected. The children were given white and chocolate milk, the adults had good coffee with pastries and bread. The children were even given chocolate bars. After that, bedding was prepared for us and we welcomed the much needed rest. In the morning, we were treated to a large breakfast and then lunch. A larger bus arrived to take us to the town of Borgholm. Our belongings from our boat were brought to us at that time also to be disinfected. Baths were prepared for us and we were given new underwear and clothes...even shoes. Then we were examined by a doctor and given a diphtheria test. Following that, we were taken to a hotel where we were fed with hot coffee, hot chocolate and pastries. We were also being quarantined. Each family was given a room and there we lived as guests and not refugees. We were fed 4 times a day. After 3 weeks, the quarantine was lifted as well as 2 tests for diphtheria were taken. At that time, they took us on a 2 hr. boat ride to Kalmar, on mainland Sweden where we had chest xrays taken and found all of us to be healthy.

We take walks around the town...the men work during the day when available and we are given 2 kronas per adult per week for pocket money. The men buy smoking material and I am able to purchase a couple of kilos of apples each week for little Andy.

Today is the 18th of November...first frost of the season. We have all been invited to the Baptist church on Saturday evening for coffee. The church was decorated with beautiful flowers and the tables were filled with delicious cakes, various pastries and even a Latvian flag. The site brought tears of joy to my eyes. Other refugees from Estonia and Finland had been invited as well. The church's congregation entertained us with music and beautiful songs. We also got to sing the Latvian anthem and "Saulit Tecej Tecedama". That is how we celebrated the 18th of November...Latvija's National Holiday. Otherwise, each day follows the prior day. Every 3rd day, Ilze Pukulis and I work in the kitchen preparing meals and the remaining days we clean our rooms and corridors, mind the children and think about our homeland and homes there. Not a day goes by that we don't think of our family and birthplace. We talk about them and wonder....how are you...are you alive or have you been sent to Russia or Germany?? We listen to the radio when possible and little Andy can't forget Latvija. Everyday, when he's playing with his toys, he says let's go back to Latvija. When I ask him what is in Latvija for you... he says Aunt Katina, my Godmother and Grandmother. Our days go by waiting for the war to end. On November 26th, again we were invited for coffee....a very delightful evening. Four of our group have been given jobs and the rest of us are still together.

Today December 22nd has arrived and when I look back, it all seems like a dream...not the real thing. My thoughts of my homeland stick to me like burs stick to clothing. Every friend appears before my eyes...let alone my family and my dear mother. Only those who have experienced the separation from family and homeland knows the sadness I feel. When I was home with all my loved ones, I could never feel the love that I have for them now that I am separated from them...especially, my mother. If you (mother) were here with me, then I would have everything and I would be so fortunate and happy. When I got the news that my sister (Mrs. Zazis) and family had come the same road that we had taken, I felt fortunate and happy, but at the same time, my sorrow and sadness is greater for my dear mother who has been left like a tree with broken branches. My heart shudders when I think of it. And that is how the days and nights come and go... and then come the next days with their own sorrows and sadness.

Now it is December 28th and 1944 is almost closed and my thoughts wonder what the new year is bringing. What is left is to pray to God that he guards and guides us so that we could return to our beloved homeland and greet our loved ones.

We are preparing to bring in the New Year. All the necessary groceries have been delivered...whatever we have been allocated. We have been notified that everyone has to move to the large refugee camp in the city of Kalmar where the residents are delegated jobs. Nothing is left but to pack our meager items and once again leave the place we have come to love and move on in this world...not knowing my fate and what's ahead. When we arrived at the station, there was a crowd ...we did get seats on the train. From there, we had to take a small boat over a canal which separates Eland from ~~xxxxxx~~. When we crossed the canal and ended up in Kalmar, the director of the refugee camp met us and took us to the camp. It is located on the edge of town and had 240 Latvians living there. I did not know anyone. The room that we were escorted to had 38 people in it. The beds were set up as one above the other and the lower bunk did not allow you to sit up. When I looked around, I was unable to control my emotions and started to cry like a child who had been chastised. My husband scolded me and pointed out to me that my behavior was a sin against God because there were people that were far worse off than we. I collected myself and made preparations for sleeping. Supper was eaten and then we took our rest. By morning, we had already contented ourselves to our new living situation even though I had not slept much that night. Our meals are improved...they come from the army's kitchen. After eating, we were responsible for washing our own dishes and currently that is our only job.