

STOWAWAYS

Some days mark you...

1. On Deck:

It was early afternoon, not long after the lunch that left their Tourist Class section in the ship's aft ripe with the smell of poached fish and boiled vegetables. There was little wind in the cloudless and warm late summer sky but a comforting breeze from the movement of the ship through the ocean waters lured scores of passengers to the main deck. Many tried to find a brighter and less stuffy alternative to the sub-level dining hall or the shared dark cabins and cramped steerage quarters in the ship's bowels where they slept. In the open air, people chatted, smoked, played cards and chess, argued, lounged in chairs. Many napped. It was early March, six months after Poldi's tenth birthday.

They were on the Pacific, somewhere off the coast of Ecuador, on the way to their next stopping port, Guayaquil, sailing on the *ss Marco Polo* – an Italia Line passenger ship making a bimonthly round-trip from western South America to southern Europe and back. Poldi's elderly grandmother, his *omama* Lina, and he were sailing to Panama. In Cristóbal, they were transferring to a much smaller freight vessel – a United Fruit Company “banana boat” – that would take them to a new home in the United States. It was here after the war's end that the scattered surviving members of their family hoped to reconstitute their shattered lives.

On deck, Poldi stood alone by one of the railings, near a lifeboat, looking at nothing but ocean, an occasional flying fish, and the waxing waves before his eyes. His grandmother dozed on a deck chair nearby, her ever-present purse and eyeglasses balanced precariously on her chest. She, together with his parents, had been among the

thousands of Austrian and German Jews who had found asylum from Nazi persecution in Bolivia – where Poldi was born – one of the few countries in the world to accept Jewish refugees during the desperate years of their forced displacement before the start of the war. But unlike his mother and father who had had to remain back in La Paz to await a quota opening that would allow them to file for admission to the United States, she had received a visa. And Poldi, born in the Americas, had also been granted a U.S. immigration permit with a Bolivian passport. Very few Bolivians applied for U.S. resident visas. That annual quota was never filled.

It was undoubtedly mainly due to this fact that Poldi was on the *Marco Polo* that afternoon. Like many others from the borderland province of Austria where she had grown up, his grandmother spoke German and some Hungarian, but she had learned little Spanish and no English during her decade-long residence in Bolivia. She had felt unable to travel alone, and her visa was scheduled to expire if she did not use it soon. Poldi' spoke Spanish, German, and a little English. And since he could enter the U.S. with a residence visa, his parents sent him as her escort and translator. He would live with relatives already in the United States.

Only many years later did Poldi begin to wonder if he had *even* been asked for an opinion before his father and mother decided that he emigrate with his grandmother. Yet the fact that he was on this ship and going to live in the United States would, in all likelihood, have seemed totally natural to him at the time – a matter of course that had to happen – as if he had always been prepared for that moment to arrive. Even though he was born a citizen of a country that provided many in his family and thousands of others safe haven, he was encouraged not to deepen his roots there, not to think of Bolivia as a place where he belonged. Throughout their years in that country, his parents

and most of their German-speaking Jewish refugee friends always lived like temporary visitors, sojourners, not permanent residents. Despite the generosity of Bolivians in having saved their lives, they were never made to feel – or come to feel – as though they genuinely belonged and were part of Bolivian social and political reality. They never said this to him directly, but his father and mother certainly transmitted their feelings to him through their actions. Many times he heard how they had landed in South America in grim poverty, stripped of practically everything they owned by the Nazi gangsters that had forced them to leave their homes and native land. Yet, even after their lives eased up a bit and his father began to earn a steady income as a plumber and electrician in the large construction projects that emerged in La Paz after the war, his family never acquired any substantial material possessions – no apartment, no house, no auto, not even the bicycle the boy had so wanted. Nothing that might tie them down.

As he stood near the deck railings that afternoon, Poldi felt lonely and sad. He was a little frightened, uncertain about what was in store for him and anxious about the length of his separation from his mother and father. But he also relished the excitement of the experience he was undergoing – the thrill of the journey, the very newness of his surroundings, the I-can-do-it optimism about the responsibility with which he had been entrusted. Rosie, his mother, had often used two German words, *sehnsucht* (yearning) and *heimweh* (homesickness), when she spoke about her younger years and the places in her native Vienna from which she and her fellow refugees were so viciously displaced. At the same time, she also expressed resentment and anger in her words. Her nostalgia, like that of so many other Hitler-era refugees, was tempered by the bitterness of critical memory. His father and grandmother shared her sentiments. Unlike them, however, Poldi, a much more complicit emigrant, had no reason to feel angry about the country

where he was born. And he had not yet allowed himself to miss his friends, school, and the stark, stunningly breathtaking beauty of the place where he had lived and been raised. For him there was no *heimweh* yet, no *sehnsucht*. Those would come later. At this moment, leaving La Paz permanently and moving to the United States was like concluding the chapter of an adventure book. It was time to turn the page.

2. *Illegal Passenger*

I continued to stare at the sea that afternoon for quite some time. But suddenly, my reverie was interrupted by the abruptness of our ship coming to a stop in mid ocean. Almost immediately crewmembers appeared on deck as if from everywhere, and the noise of the anchors being lowered broke the afternoon calm.

“What’s the matter?” people shouted.

“What’s going on?”

“Why have we stopped with no land anywhere in sight?”

“Are we on fire?” my grandmother asked, rising out of her slumber and making her way over to where I stood. “Not like the Orazio. No, for godsake, not like the Orazio.”

Her face had turned white. She seemed frightened and her words and distress upset me immediately. Even I, at age ten, had heard about the Orazio tragedy that had occurred early in 1940 – the uncontrollable fire, sinking, and death of some 120 passengers, all of them refugees on the way to Bolivia. The Orazio had been the sister-ship of the Virgilio, the Italian Line vessel on which my parents had sailed to South America a few months earlier. And now, here we were, on another Italia Line ship!

But, no, we were soon assured, there was no fire on the Marco Polo.

“Passegero clandestino,” one of the Italian crewmen close to us, shouted, as if this would explain the unexpected stop and the scrambling activity on board. “Abbiamo

scoperto passeggero clandestino," he repeated in Italian. Then, viewing our confusion, he said in Spanish, "Polizón. Descubrimos un polizón."

"Ein illegaler Passagier. Blinder Passagier" I translated for my grandmother, "they found a stowaway."

"But why are we stopping here?" asked another passenger sitting nearby. Many more people had now come on deck and begun to congregate near the railings.

"Because we are going to off-load him here. We will put him in a life-boat and take him over to our sister-ship which will approach soon. It is on its way south, to Callao, where the stowaway came on board." The crewman responded in a mixture of Italian and Spanish, and then left, making his way to help others unfasten and uncover a tarp from the large lifeboat close to where I was standing.

On the water, in the distance, I could now see the funnels and then the shape of another ship moving towards us.

"It's the Antoniotto Usodimare," someone soon pointed out. "Look, it's stopping too. It's dropping anchor."

But my attention and effort to see was distracted when I heard someone say, "They are bringing the stowaway."

I turned away from the water and looked towards one of the deck doors. I expected to see a man emerge, bound, perhaps baleful, led like a criminal by the ship's officers and sailors. Since they had stopped in mid ocean, dropped anchor, and felt it necessary to send the stowaway back to the port where he had sneaked aboard, it seemed logical to me that the crew thought of him as dangerous and decided that they did not want to keep him on board until our next port of call. Let the authorities deal with him back in Callao where he came from.

"There they are. They are coming," someone shouted.

"There he is. That's him. The stowaway."

The door opened and two officers and a crewman emerged. Walking between them was a young boy, about my height and age, wearing tire-sole sandals, torn pants and a tattered, unbuttoned, short-sleeved shirt. Black haired with dark-colored features, he was visibly and audibly weeping, and his face, marked by dirt, was streaked with tears from his swollen eyes. He looked despondent, miserable. "Had they beaten him when they found him?" I wondered. "Had they hurt him?"

The four were walking towards the large lifeboat where I was standing. It had been uncovered of its tarp and lowered to deck level, and sailors stood ready to climb into it for the transfer crossing to the awaiting sister-ship. To reach the small access stepladder that was placed near the deck railing, the boy stowaway and his escorts had to pass within a couple of feet from my place. And as they did so, the boy raised his head and fixed his eyes on me for what must only have been seconds but which felt like minutes. "Por favor. Les pido a todos ustedes. Quiero ir a Colombia, juntarme con mi papá que esta alla buscando trabajo." "Please. I beg you all," he implored. "I want to go to Colombia, join my father, who's there seeking work."

He had barely finished speaking when an officer and a sailor grabbed him on his upper arms and lifted him into the lifeboat. They and the other sailors then climbed in as well and the boat was lowered to ocean level and detached from its holding cables. Within minutes they were on their way, bobbing on the waves towards the Antoniotto Usodimare. I stood next to my grandmother, in a crowd of people now, watching the small dark-haired figure disappear in the distance.

"Warum weinst du so?" grandmother Lina asked me. "Why are you crying?"

I couldn't answer her.

3.

When he was still a very young child he was told that his grandfather, Leopold, after whom he was named, died on the ship during the voyage that brought his mother, father, and grandmother to South America from Europe. On that voyage, which had started in Genoa three months before the start of the war, there were hundreds of persons like his parents and grandparents – refugees from Austria, Germany, and elsewhere who were fleeing the Nazis.

He was shown a photo of the ship, bright white in color, with two tall masts and a large funnel spewing grey smoke. He also looked at pictures from that voyage – mostly shipboard photos of his parents and other passengers, and a few taken at a stopover in Cristóbal, near the Panama Canal, when everyone could briefly get off the ship and visit the port area. His mother has a big belly in these photographs, and when he asked her why, she smiled and told him “because you are in there” – *ein blinder Passagier* – a stowaway on the voyage.

“You are my little blond stowaway,” she often said to him, tussling his hair and smiling.

But sometimes when she said this, she just looked at him and sighed.

Leo Spitzer viii/2015