

SEA VOYAGE TO AUSTRALIA 1851–1852

In these days a letter came to hand from J. Zwar (formerly) of Drehsa, describing what happened to him and his fellow travellers on the long sea voyage to Australia. Perhaps many of our readers will be interested to learn of their experiences, so we share this with them. However we will not print Zwar's news concerning Australia, since we have already published his later and more complete reports, in our newspaper: "Tydsenske Nowiny" ("Weekly News".)

The ship on which the above mentioned migrants traveled, was called "Helene" which left Hamburg on August 20, 1851. They only left Gluckstadt on September 3rd and arrived at Cuxhaven some hours later. Here a doctor joined the ship. On the next day they reached the open sea where, as Zwar writes, there was nothing to be seen except huge waves.

“With this many were seized by sea-sickness, which brings on terrible bouts of vomiting and lasted for two days. Some of the migrants remained well, also the greater part of the children, including our own Marka. On September 6th we passed through the waters between England and France, both of which were visible to us. This part of the sea is called the Channel and is dangerous for shipping because the winds can easily drive them ashore and wreck them. The most treacherous part is where the River Thames flows into the sea over numerous sandbanks, and on which our captain once ran aground. Because of that he remained on watch all night and frequently measured the depth of the water. The ship's crew are well acquainted with the nature of the seabed in the various parts of the ocean, whether it is of sand, rock, clay and so on. So they watch carefully, to ascertain the nature of the seabed beneath them. They are especially careful in the Channel, because of the dangers likely to be encountered. This is to way they measure the depth and test the seabed: as a weight the sailors lower a piece of lead, which had a large hole filled with tallow. The material on the seabed clings to the tallow and the sailors know from this what to expect.

After two days we had passed through the Channel. For some days I was not able to see what was going on as I was ill until September 13. On the evening of September 19th we experienced a violent electrical storm and everyone took shelter between decks. There was no panic noticeable as the migrants sang one hymn of praise after the other. During these six days we had strong contrary winds, so that during this time we progressed only 30 miles. Then on September 26th we made better progress covering 60 miles in 24 hours. On September 27th we had a severe storm, although the waves were no higher than about 15 Ellen = about 45 feet. Such a turbulent sea is actually wonderful to behold, for beside every mountainous wave one sees a deep trough, the one constantly alternating with the other.

During these days we passed by the Canary Islands, but could not see them. We also had to omit our divine service in Wendish as the ship rocked violently. On

October 14th the only daughter of Johann Miertschink of Doehlen died. She was lowered into the sea on the same day with the singing of hymns, a funeral address and prayer.

On October 15th we crossed the equator or the circle of the sun and on October 19 we came closest to the sun, so that it stood directly above us. The highest temperature was when one day we had 39 degrees in the sun and 25 degrees in the shade. The temperature of the water was 22 degrees. During that time children and adults bathed daily, which is very healthy. On October 21st we passed the Island of Helena, but did not see it because the distance between us was 330 miles. On October 25 Miertschink's second child died, their three-year-old boy Johann. A solemn memorial service was held, but the body was lowered into the sea only on the following day following a funeral address. On November 9th Andreas Ponich's three month old son died and was buried at sea on November 10th.

Because we had continual headwinds from the Channel to the Equator, it happened at times that many ships lay near one another, because they could make no headway. Once when we were close to the African coast it happened that 16 ships were moving around close to each other so that the captains could converse with each other through speaking tubes. Also we were overtaken by a ship called "Hermann" belonging to the same shipping firm as our "Helene". It had left Hamburg later than we had. This ship was sailing to the American land of Mexico. Because the ships mentioned were sailing to America, Africa and so on, we were all alone after crossing the Equator.

There we saw huge shoals of fish, in particular whales, sharks, dolphins and flying fish. The whales could be seen from a considerable distance, as they pumped the water up about 10 yards. Some whales came close to our ship and mostly about 15 yards of their bodies was visible. When such a whale came close, everyone, both young and old hurried on deck to get a better view of the fish. The flying fish are very much like herrings and about as large, only more rectangular in shape. They rise from the ocean much as the sparrows rise from the wheat fields where you are. They fly as long as they are wet, say about 200 - 300 paces.

Birds also accompanied our ship. At the Equator we first of all saw native swallows. Some hundreds of miles before the Gape of Good Hope, the so-called Cape pigeons came toward us. Then various other birds appeared, the largest being the Albatross which measures 5 to 6 yards from wing tip to wing tip. All these birds have webbed feet and we could catch them when they alighted on the water much as fish are caught with a hook using fatty meat or pork. To the neck of one albatross we caught, we attached a little board with the message "The Ship "Helene" of Hamburg" and then released the bird.

On Friday, November 21st, a great wind arose, so that the waves played with our ship as though it were a ball. Because the waves flew over the deck and poured between decks, we had to close off the entrance to that area and because it was

then dark below, we had to light a lantern. We had to tie down the kitchen utensils on this day and if we wished to eat out of a dish or bowl we had to hold it firmly, otherwise things would fly everywhere. Our captain would have preferred to take a course from south to east, but because that would have brought us in line with the Edward Islands and because of the strong gale and thick fog which reduced visibility he did not attempt it as we could easily have run aground as the ocean depths around these islands is still not sufficiently known. The greatest depth so far recorded is about 24,000 feet or one German mile (about four English miles - translator). The depth is easily recognizable from the colour of the water: the deeper the water, the deeper the shade of blue it is; so blue that one would think it would dye things blue. Yet when you take it and pour it into a glass, it is as pure and clear as silver; but salty as though it were pure salt. Where the water is less deep it is greenish in colour and where shallow it has a yellowish green hue.

On Sunday, November 23rd, our captain felt that an even more severe storm could lash us. He accordingly ordered the masthead and a number of cross-arms to be brought down. During this dangerous undertaking a sailor fell about 34 yards to the deck. God, however, so protected him that he was not hurt by this fall. He called himself a bad fellow and often enough sang the song: "In the darkest night sailors will find the smallest place of pleasure, but in broadest daylight cannot see the largest church." Perhaps this fall helped to reform him.

Next day the wind died down, so our ship could take an easterly course, leaving the Edward Islands to the north. On November 27th it began to snow and everyone hunted around for fur coats, felt shoes and gloves. Those who had none, had to suffer much from the cold.

On the evening of November 27th a gale began to rage so that many on board believed that everything would be smashed to pieces since the waves hurled themselves 'on the ship from every side and tossed it about as though it were a nutshell. All of us cried for God to be merciful. I drew comfort from Psalm 6:6 and Psalm 30: 10 (Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be Thou my helper). At 3.00 am one could hear songs of praise from some of the cabins. God, the Lord, had heard the cry of His children and warned the wind to come no further. The wind was still strong, but under it we made rapid headway so that already on November 29th we passed by Kerguelen Island and on December 3, Amsterdam and Paul Islands.

I would have liked to have seen it and indeed asked God for this that this wind might soon bring us to Australia for the time of my wife's confinement was approaching. If that were not possible, I asked that the sea might be calm at least when her hour came.

But it did not happen as I had prayed, for on December 4, as we became aware that the time was near when my wife should be delivered, the sea was still quite turbulent and the ship rocked from side to side. At 6.am we were together in bed

drinking coffee, when a huge wave suddenly hurled itself over the ship, covered the deck and rushed between decks. It also entered my cabin so that little Maria, who was still asleep, was completely covered with water. I lifted her up but I and my wife found ourselves sitting in water. There was a considerable amount of water between decks and boxes, cups, boots and other things were floating around everywhere.

All were greatly alarmed because most thought that an even greater disaster had occurred than was the case. We had to change into new, dry clothes but every bed and pillow was soaked and all the while the hour of birth was drawing nearer. But God that very day sent warm weather so that the beds all dried. That afternoon my wife gave birth to a son and that without the doctor assisting. The captain and all others were happy about this event and congratulated me, particularly since they had feared that the anxiety experienced may have affected my wife adversely. However all went well and our new little son was baptized on December 14th. He was a healthy child which caused us to be very happy. However our joy was soon taken according to God's will, for he passed away after several days and was buried at sea on December 21, not far from the first Australian island [Kangaroo Island – translator].

Our captain wished himself just one more day of wind for we still had about 60 miles to cover to reach Adelaide. But the winds were mostly contrary so that it was only on December 25 that we entered the harbour of Port Adelaide.

Our sea voyage was actually very pleasant, especially since all our migrant people were motivated by love; and love is needed everywhere.

We had daily divine services. Soon after breakfast we mostly assembled on deck where the men for the greater part smoked a pipe, others tailored men's garments with the women sewing or mending dresses. The men engaged in discussions concerning Christian doctrine or more mundane affairs. As often as not, the sea or the weather was the subject discussed, as also the events in nature, for instance sunrise and sunset, which are particularly beautiful in the tropics. At sea it can clearly be seen that the earth is round for when a ship approaches, one does not see the entire ship but first of all the masthead, then the upper sail, then the remaining sails and finally the ship itself. If the earth were flat, one would see the entire ship right away. But when one sees the upper part of a ship first and later the lower part, there can only be one reason for this - the curvature of the earth. At the equator the days throughout the year are always exactly 12 hours long, because there, as one could say, the sun always follows the same course. There is no gradual dawn and dusk, rather the sun rises suddenly and similarly sinks suddenly into darkness.

Concerning the meals, everyone regarded them according to his taste, the one sweet the other sour, the third thin, the fourth thick. You cannot please everybody.

Nevertheless it is true that our cook was neither pleasant nor capable. Because of him the sick did not receive that which they needed. Otherwise, every passenger received what could fairly be expected. There were adequate supplies of bread, butter and meat, all of good quality. The captain was somewhat miserly so that I had to confront him several times. Once we were served mouldy bread and the migrants were set on throwing it to the pigs. I had the bread gathered up and had the captain in a fix when I said: "If you do not give us good bread, this mouldy stuff will serve as evidence against you when we lodge a protest."

We immediately received good bread. On another occasion a large barrel of smelly water was set out for our use, but when we complained to the captain we received another and better supply. Even though I was required to present all these complaints, the captain did not hate me, rather liked me the more for it and said as my wife approached the time of her confinement that he was ready to place everything he had at her disposal. He else showed me the ocean charts on which the sea lanes and also the sandbanks and danger spots were indicated.

After our arrival at Port Adelaide Ponich was sent to Rosedale to ask our acquaintances there to fetch us. As we had time the rest of us went the town of Adelaide. We were not attracted by the country around Port Adelaide, However because we saw that the people there were not poor and cattle were plentiful we concluded that the land was fertile. In Adelaide we learnt that our acquaintances in Rosedale, to whom Ponich had been sent, had sold their properties and planned to settle at Portland Bay with their Wendish and German friends from Melbourne. So we decided, regardless of whether it would be better or worse there, to move there also so that we could be together. When Ponich returned, he confirmed that our people there had disposed of their properties but would only be transferring to the new area in March. Now we were at a loss to know what to do with our baggage, whether we should have it brought to shore only to load it back on board a few months later. This seemed rather an expensive business, also our captain who was to sail from Adelaide to Melbourne passing near Portland Bay would only have been too pleased to take us along.

However because our Rosedale brethren were keen for us to help them with the harvest, they came to get us with quite a few wagons. In view of this we rented a house in Port Adelaide to store our goods, taking with us to Rosedale only what was really needed.

I mentioned above that we all wanted to move with our friends to Portland Bay. However, nothing came of that. Only a few went, among them Hundrack, Burger, Miertschink and Rentsch who came from Kuppritz. They left Rosedale and district in April. They decided to relocate, because they were searching for a region with adequate water and large trees. In this they were successful, for various shepherds who had been there told us that such country was available, although in their opinion it was more suitable for grazing than for cropping. In Australia the presence of large trees is an indication that the soil is cold, unsuitable

for agriculture. Despite this, I still wish to visit that part this year to inspect the country. In the meantime I want to purchase a section here. Hempel, Wukatsch, Zimmer, Graf and a number of others plan to do the same.

Note by editor: Soon we hope to publish Ponich's letter which has only just arrived, written in cheerful strain. In it he reports on the experiences of the Australian Wends at Portland Bay.