

The Last Voyage of the Brig *Reform*

By Frank Wissel

By 1853 many Old Lutherans had left Europe for Australia and the United States. This article is the story of thirty five Wends who had initially planned to go to Australia, but in July of 1853, they changed their minds and instead sailed to Galveston, Texas.¹ The thirty five were the Matthes Matthiez, George Schelnik, Johann Casper [Kasper], Hans Casper [Kasper], Johann Domaschk [Thomaschke], Christoph Krause and August Polnik families.² They boarded a train in Bautzen, Saxony on August 29, 1853 and headed to Bremen on the first leg of their long trip. On September 4, 1853 they departed Bremen on a two-masted ship known as the brig *Reform* bound for Galveston.^{3,4} Little did they know that this would be the last voyage ever to be sailed by the *Reform*.

Johann Kasper and his brother Hans Kasper, in a letter to a friend, relayed their account as to what happened on their voyage. The letter was printed in early 1854 in the Wendish newspaper *Serbske Nowiny* and was later translated into English by Dr. Joseph Wilson.⁴ The story told here is based on the Kasper brothers' letter with corroboration from other sources.

The voyage of the thirty five Wends on the *Reform* was uneventful through the month of September and into the second week of October. The winds were in their favor and the sailing was good.⁴ On October 9, 1853, Agnes Matthiez was born to Dorothea Rehle, the wife of Matthes Matthiez.^{2, 4} Ten days later, October 19, 1853, tragedy struck either the Krause or the Polnik family with the loss of a son. The records do not contain the name of the child but it was either: Johann Krause, Johann Polnik or August Seamann Polnik. All three died before the end of 1854, but one of them died on the voyage.² Six days later, on October 25, 1853, about 11 P.M., after eight weeks at sea and just a few weeks short of Galveston, the *Reform* shipwrecked off the coast of Cuba, nearly splitting in two after hitting a rock.^{4, 5}

The Wends feared for their lives and did not try to get their possessions as they were too concerned about surviving. Someone hung a lantern as a sign of distress (presumably a crew member), hoping it would quickly be seen as they were near an island. About four hours later a small Spanish steamship used to carry freight between coastal ports rescued them and took them to shore. Most of their possessions were already in the water and all they were able to take with them were the clothes on their backs and some of their bedding.^{4, 5}

When they were taken to shore, they were unable to communicate with the people they encountered. Someone must have recognized the language they were speaking and sent for a German translator, after which they were taken to the town of Nuevitas.⁴

After they arrived in Nuevitas, they were "well cared for" by others. Who these other people were in Nuevitas is not known, but it is known that the Wends, and presumably the other passengers and crew, were cared for a total of three days. After the three days in Nuevitas (Oct. 26 – 28), the people who had been caring for them, put them on a steamer bound for Havana.⁴ The steamer took only about three days to get from Nuevitas to Havana (Oct. 29 – 31).⁶ Once in Havana, the German Society and the German Consul took care of them for another three days (Nov. 1 – 3). Maria Michalk Krause, wife of Christoph Krause, learned to make cigars while in Cuba though it is unknown whether that occurred in Nuevitas or Havana.⁷ After their three day stay in Havana, the *Reform* survivors boarded the steamer called the *United States*. It arrived in New Orleans on November 7, 1853 but due to fog, they could not dock until the next day, November 8.⁵

In New Orleans, they needed a place to stay but did not have any money so they went to the police and asked for help. Someone at the police station contacted the German Society of New Orleans. The German Society of New Orleans found them room and board for the night, for which they paid the proprietor \$54.00. They also spent \$372.60 for new clothes, shoes and socks for the survivors of the *Reform* who were in need of help.^{8, 9} The next

day, November 9, 1853, the survivors of the *Reform* boarded the steamer *Mexico* bound for Galveston.^{3, 5, 8} At Galveston, each adult was given \$6 and each child \$3 by the German Consul courtesy of the German Society of Havana.⁴

However, Galveston was not the end of their trip. Although the Kasper letter does not state the destinations of each family, in all likelihood the group of Wends stayed together and continued on to Houston. In Houston, the Kasper brothers' found wagons and presumably purchased them with the money they had received from the German Society of Havana. After they obtained the wagons, they found Mr. F. G. Seydler (master mason from Bautzen) and travelled on to New Ulm. The journey to New Ulm from Houston took about a week. Once in New Ulm, the Kasper brothers found work with another Wend, Mr. George Helas.⁴

The Kasper brothers did not live very long after arriving at New Ulm. Hans Kasper died at the age of 42 on September 26, 1855. Johann Kasper only lived to the age of 48 years and died about one month after his brother on October 20 1855.²

Matthes Mattheiz settled in New Ulm and farmed until about 1860 before he moved to Willow Branch. By 1855 August Polnik had settled on Rabbs Creek. Christoph Krause was renting in Frelsburg in 1856 and Johann Domaschk was a farmer in the Low Pinoak Settlement. By 1857 George Schelnik was also a farmer in the Low Pinoak Settlement.¹⁰

While the life of the brig *Reform* ended that fateful night of October 25, 1853, fortunately the lives of the passengers and crew did not. While it took them about another three weeks to get to Galveston, they made it. It is known that many of the Wends on that last voyage of the *Reform* were happy. They wrote letters to those they left behind in Germany, telling them about their voyage and what they experienced in Texas. The thirty-five Wends had been part of Pastor Johann Kilian's congregation back in Germany. Their letters were so positive, that Pastor Kilian's congregation decided to immigrate to Texas. They numbered almost 600 when they left Germany, but only about 500 reached Galveston.¹¹

Fortunately Pastor Johann Kilian was a very good record keeper. Thanks to him the thirty-five Wends who made the 1853 trip are known.² Thanks to the Kasper brothers' letter, and Pastor Kilian's article published April 15, 1854 in the *Kirchenblatt fur die Evangelisch-Lutherischen Gemeinden in Preussen*, the story of their journey was preserved.¹²

From Pastor Kilian's article, as translated by Dr. Wilson, the generosity of the German Society in Havana was also preserved. The German Society of Havana paid the sum of \$2,200 for the *Reform* survivors to travel by steamer from Havana to New Orleans and to Galveston. In addition to their fares, the survivors were given \$500.¹²

While \$2,700 is a large sum of money today, think about how much that was in 1853! The German Society in Havana and the German Society of New Orleans were very generous to the passengers and crew of the *Reform*. So were the people in the city of Nuevitas, Cuba. Their generosity was immense, and without it, who knows what would have happened to those who were on board the *Reform* on that fateful voyage. Without that voyage and the letters written by the thirty-five Wends, there might not have been a Wendish community in Serbin, Texas.

The Passengers of the *Reform*

While the Kasper brothers' letter does not specify the name of the ship they traveled on, the timeline for their travels are corroborated by the Wendish weekly newspaper, *Tydzenske Nowiny* published in Bautzen, Germany¹; the New Orleans newspapers: *The Daily Crescent*⁵, the *Louisiana Staats Zeitung*⁶ and the *New Orleans Deutsches Zeitung*⁸; the meeting minutes from the December 7, 1853 Seventh Regular Meeting of the Board of Directors of the German Society of New Orleans⁹; and the German newspaper, *Neu-Braunfelser Zeitung*

published in New Braunfels, Texas³. All of these publications, with the exception of the *Tydzenske Nowiny*, mention the *Reform*.

The identity of the other passengers on the *Reform* were not known as the passenger list for this voyage was lost or destroyed. Nor do we know the exact number of the passengers and crew. The *Louisiana Staats Zeitung* from November 10, 1853 reported the total number of passengers as 98¹³; *The Sailors Magazine and Naval Journal*, Volume XXVI stated: "Passengers, officers and crew, in all 94 persons, including women and children..."¹⁴; while the *New Orleans Deutsches Zeitung* from November 11, 1853 listed the number of German immigrants as 91: "The crew and the passengers, amongst whom there were 91 German immigrants..."⁸

The Daily Crescent newspaper on November 8, 1853, listed the names and family members of forty-seven passengers "and 157 in the steerage" from New York, on the steamship *United States* after its arrival in New Orleans from Havana. It also listed the eleven passengers from Havana "and five in the steerage" for a total of 220 people. While *The Daily Crescent* confirmed that those rescued from the *Reform* were on the *United States* when it arrived in New Orleans, it did not state their names or their number.⁵

The New Orleans Bee from November 8, 1853 also listed the names of passengers and family members on the steamer *United States* from New York and Havana but did not mention the *Reform* at all,¹⁵ neither did *The Daily Picayune*. It listed 204 passengers by name on the steamer *United States* and the total number of passengers as 212 in their November 8, 1853 edition.¹⁶

The Weather

It is not known exactly why the *Reform* ran aground. The Kasper brothers blame the captain. They do not mention the weather as having been a factor though there was a category 1 hurricane off the Northeast coast of Florida on October 20, 1853 that headed north, grew to a category level 2 storm, then weakened back down to a category 1 storm before losing power on October 22, 1853 off the coast of South Carolina where it was no longer a hurricane. The storm inflicted wind damage to parts of Northern Florida, Georgia and Charlestown, South Carolina. Some buildings and ships were damaged. Some of the ships damaged were in the harbors and some were at sea.¹⁷ The storm moved to the north away from the area of where the *Reform* ran aground on October 25, 1853 and was the last recorded storm of the season so it is doubtful that it had any effect on the *Reform* running aground.

Would You Cross the Ocean on this Ship?

A brig was a sailing vessel with two square-rigged masts. The brig was developed from the brigantine. The brigantine was also a sailing vessel with two masts, but only the foremast (mast toward the front of the ship) was square-rigged. The brig had greater sailing power than the brigantine and required a smaller crew, even though there were more sails on a brig. Because the sails on a brig were smaller than the ones on a brigantine, they were easier to manage.¹⁸ Brigs were popular in the 18th and 19th centuries and used as naval vessels and merchant ships.

The brig *Reform* was built by E. Zieske in Stettin, Germany in 1846. (Stettin, Germany became Szczecin, Poland in 1945.) Stettin, Germany was located on the Oder River near the Baltic Sea. The *Reform* was only 109.5 feet long and 24 feet wide, with a depth of 13 feet.¹⁹ It was probably built as a merchant ship.

By looking at the measurements, one can see that the *Reform* was not a large ship. The top deck, if it was one level and went from the stem (front of the ship) to the stern (back of the ship) and all the way across the width or beam, it would have been approximately 2,600 square feet in area; or a little larger than the size of an average house in the United States in 2010.²⁰

The number of decks of the *Reform* is not known, but given the size of the vessel it would be hard to believe that it could have had more than two decks. It probably had a top deck that housed the captain's cabin, the crew's quarters and a galley (kitchen) for the captain and the crew. The second deck would have been where all the passengers slept, cooked and ate. The passengers probably stored some of their belongings on this deck, but some of their belongings may also have been stored below in the hold. The hold would have been where the food and water for the long voyage would have been stored. It is difficult to imagine the *Reform* held about 90 immigrants and their possessions; the ship's crew; and enough food and water for all of them for the length of the voyage of over two months. Would you cross the ocean on this ship?

Figure 1 is a picture of the United States brig *Niagara*.²¹ It is similar in size to the *Reform*. The *Niagara* is 110 feet and 8 inches in length at the waterline, 32 feet wide (1 ½ times wider than the *Reform*) and has a draft of 10 feet 6 inches. The U.S. brig *Niagara* was a naval vessel that played a pivotal role in the War of 1812. It has been rebuilt three times and now is docked at the Erie Maritime Museum in Pennsylvania, except in the summer when it is sailing on the Great Lakes.²²

A sailing ship that is physically closer to the Wendish Heritage museum than the *Niagara* is the *Elissa*, which is docked in Galveston, Texas. The *Elissa* has three masts and is known as a barque. It is almost twice as long as the *Reform*, measuring 205 feet in length from her stern to the tip of her jibboom. The *Elissa* is part of the Texas Seaport Museum in Galveston.²³

Voyages of the Brig Reform

Table 1 below shows all the voyages of the brig *Reform* found in "Czech Immigration Passenger Lists", Volume 1 by Leo Baca; "Ship Passenger Lists: Port of Galveston, Texas 1846-1871" published by the Galveston Genealogical Society; and the National Archives as transcribed by the Immigration Ships Transcribers Guild and posted on Immigrationships.net. These may not be all the voyages made by the *Reform*, but these were all the ones this author was able to find. This author also searched the three references to find other instances and ships that P. Meyn may have been listed as either the Master or Captain and found no other references. The fateful voyage of the *Reform* may have been the only voyage for which he was responsible.

Table 1. Recorded Voyages of the Brig Reform

Date of Departure	Date of Arrival	Place of Departure	Place of Arrival	Master/Captain of Ship	Number of Passengers
Unknown	June 28, 1848	Bremen, Germany	New York, New York	W. Hattendorf ²⁴	110
Unknown	May 1, 1849	Hamburg, Germany	Galveston, Texas	F. Ammermann ²⁵	72
Unknown	December 3, 1849	Bremen, Germany	New York, New York	J. Ammermann ²⁶	48
Unknown	November 29, 1850	Bremen, Germany	Galveston, Texas	J. Ammermann ²⁷	85
April 17, 1851	June 30, 1851	Bremen, Germany	Galveston, Texas	H. Ammermann ²⁸	86
September 4, 1853	Shipwrecked off Cuba October 25, 1853	Bremen, Germany	N/A	P. Meyn ²⁸	94

Figure 1. Brig *Niagara*

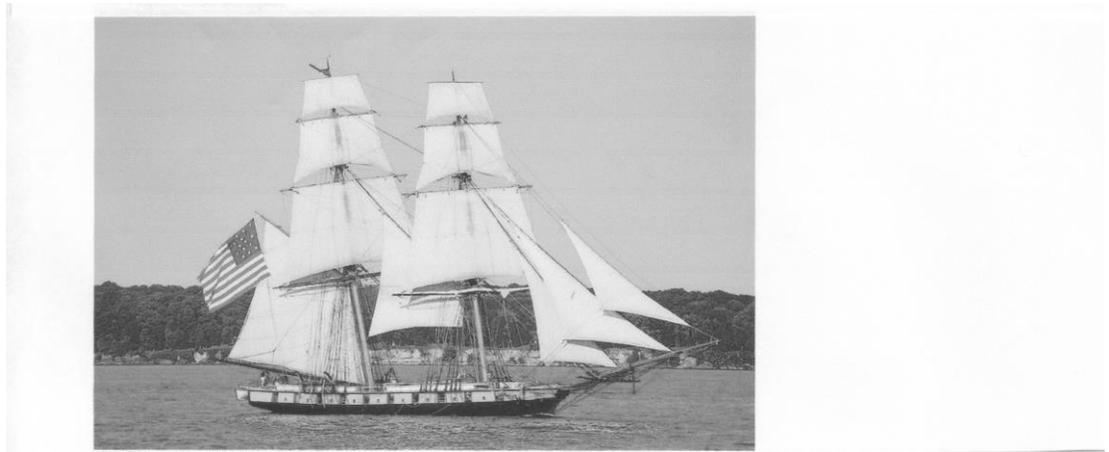


Figure 2. New Orleans Harbor

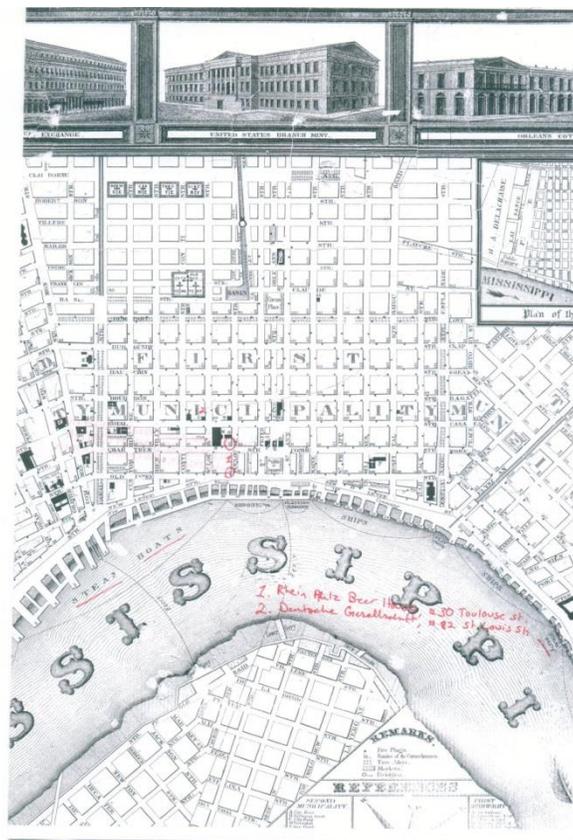


Figure 2 is the 1854 city plan of New Orleans which shows the harbor on the Mississippi River with the location of the Rhein Pfalz Beer House. Schoeneck was listed as the proprietor in the 1853 New Orleans directory. This is the place the survivors stayed after their arrival in New Orleans on November 8, 1853, shown as number 1 in Figure 2. The location of the New Orleans German Society (Deutsche Gesellschaft) is shown in Figure 2 as number 2.²⁹

Notes:

A special “thank you” goes out to Mr. Weldon Mersiovsky and the Wendish Research Exchange. Weldon asked me to write this article last year and gave me most of the information documenting the voyage of the *Reform*. All the New Orleans newspapers (both English and German) came from Barbara Munson of New Orleans. The German Society committee report and minutes are from Daniel Hammer of the Historic New Orleans Collection; along with the map of the New Orleans harbor. I would also like to thank Dr. George Nielsen who reviewed this article and gave me his comments on how to improve this article.

References 1-4 below were first published in *Shipwreck to Settlement: Krause, a Wendish Heritage: Christoph and Maria Krause, their Family: Bamsch, Bohot, Hohle, Krause, Schmidt* written by Sherry Kay Gordon Clifton, Weldon Walter Mersiovsky and Charles Edward Schneider.

- ¹ Dr. Joseph Wilson, *Tydzenske Nowiny* (Bautzen, July 1853), p. 240 as translated from the original Wendish.
- ² Johann Kilian, *List of the Lutherans who want to emigrate from the congregation of the undersigned pastor to Texas in America this year (1853)*, as translated from the original German by Dr. Joseph Wilson from the Department of German and Slavic at Rice University in Houston, Texas.
- ³ Dr. Joseph Wilson, *Neu-Braunfelser Zeitung* (New Braunfels, Texas; November 25, 1853) as translated from the original German by Dr. Joseph Wilson from the Department of German and Slavic at Rice University in Houston, Texas.
- ⁴ Johann and Hans Kasper (Casper) letter, *Serbske Nowiny* (published early 1854); pp. 85 and 92 as translated from the original Wendish by Dr. Joseph Wilson from the Department of German and Slavic at Rice University in Houston, Texas.
- ⁵ *The Daily Crescent* (New Orleans, Louisiana; November 8, 1853).
- ⁶ *The New York Times* (New York, New York; July 23, 1876) “A Tour of Cuba”.
- ⁷ Anne Blasig, *The Wends of Texas* (Austin, Texas; Armstrong Printing, 1998) page 12.
- ⁸ *New Orleans Deutsches Zeitung* (New Orleans, Louisiana; November 11, 1853), translated from German into English by Hunter Hampton a student at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas in 2014.
- ⁹ Agents Committee Report to the Board of Directors of the German Society of New Orleans, Wednesday December 7, 1853, as translated from German into English by Daniel Hammer of The Historic New Orleans Collection in New Orleans, Louisiana.
- ¹⁰ Johann Kilian, *Baptismal Records of St. Paul Lutheran Church, Serbin, Texas 1854 – 1883* (Easley, South Carolina; Southern Historical Society Press, Inc. 1985) edited and translated by Joseph Wilson, Pages 49, 3, 10, 8 and 16.
- ¹¹ George R. Nielsen, *In Search of a Home Nineteenth-Century Wendish Immigration* (College Station, Texas; Texas A&M University Press, 2007) page 75.
- ¹² Johann Kilian, *Kirchenblatt fur die Evangelisch-Lutherischen Gemeinen in Preussen* (Church newspaper for the Evangelical-Lutheran Congregations in Prussia), published April 15, 1854, pages 98 and 99 as translated from the original German into English by Dr. Joseph Wilson from the Department of German and Slavic at Rice University in Houston, Texas.
- ¹³ *Louisiana Staats Zeitung* (New Orleans, Louisiana; November 10, 1853) as translated from German into English by Hunter Hampton a student at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas in 2014.
- ¹⁴ *The Sailor’s Magazine and Naval Journal* (New York, New York; published by the American Seamen’s Friend Society, August 1854) Volume XXVI, page 147.
- ¹⁵ *The New Orleans Bee* (New Orleans, Louisiana; November 8, 1853).
- ¹⁶ *The Daily Picayune* (New Orleans, Louisiana; November 8, 1853).
- ¹⁷ Al Sandrik and Christopher W. Landsea, “*Chronological Listing of Tropical Cyclones affecting North Florida and Coastal Georgia 1569-1899*”, Atlantic Oceanographic and Meteorological Laboratory, (Miami,

- Florida: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, May 2003), <http://www.aoml.noaa.gov/hrd/Landsea/history/index.html>.
- 18 R. M. (Robert Michael) Ballantyne, *Man on the Ocean – A Book about Boats and Ships* (Filiquarian Publishing, LLC./ Qontro), page 51.
- 19 Leo Baca, *Czech Immigration Passenger Lists, Volume I* (Hallettsville, Texas; Old Homestead Publishing Company, 1983), page 30.
- 20 In 2010 the average size house across the U. S. was 2,392 square feet according to the U. S. census at <http://www.census.gov/const/C25Ann/sfttotalmedavgsqft.pdf>.
- 21 Lance Woodworth, The Brig *Niagara* under full sail off of South Bass Island, Ohio on Lake Erie. Posted to Flickr June 26, 2009.
- 22 The Flagship Niagara League, <http://www.flagshipniagara.org/us-brig-niagara/flagship-niagara-about/>.
- 23 Galveston Historical Foundation, <http://www.galvestonhistory.org/attractions/maitime-heritage/1877-tall-ship-elissa>.
- 24 National Archives and Record Administration, Film M237, Reel 73, List 629 as transcribed by Gene Janssen, member of the Immigration Ships Transcribers Guild, February 28, 2013. <http://immigrantships.net/v13/1800v13/reform18480628.html>
- 25 National Archives and Record Administration, Film M237, Reel 78 as transcribed by Kathy Tolbert, member of the Immigration Ships Transcribers Guild, February 4, 2000. <http://immigrantships.net/v3/1800v3/reform18490501.html>
- 26 Galveston Historical Foundation, Immigration Database, <http://ghf.destinationnext.com/immigration/Search.aspx>.
- 27 National Archives and Record Administration, Film M255, Reel 3, as transcribed by Gene Janssen, member of the Immigration Ships Transcribers Guild, June 18, 2001. <http://immigrantships.net/v4/1800v4/reform18501129.html>
- 28 Leo Baca, *Czech Immigration Passenger Lists, Volume I* (Hallettsville, Texas; Old Homestead Publishing Company, 1983), page 33.
- 29 Daniel Hammer, “Norman’s Plan of New Orleans and Environs”, from the Historic New Orleans Collection.