

As found in the Texas Wendish Heritage Society Newsletter
Article by Weldon Mersiovsky · November 5, 2016

The following is another letter discovered in the digitally archived issues of the "Serbske Nowiny" - the Upper Sorbian-language newspaper that our ancestors read. I wish to thank Dr. Gerald Stone for translating the article into English.

"Serbske Nowiny". 15 July 1871. pages 221-222.
A Letter from America. (From J. Čech* [Czech])

Serbin, Texas, December 1870.

Dear Friend,

I want here, as I promised, to describe briefly my journey from Bremen to New Orleans.

We left Bremen on 22 October at 4 o'clock in the afternoon with a special train and it was a long train occupied only by emigrants and we arrived at about half past six in Bremerhafen, where we were to embark. Although it had already been dark for some time, they had given us no candles in our carriages, so we would have been condemned to sit the whole way in darkness, if we had not had some pieces of candle with us. And so we illuminated our compartment ourselves as well as we could. So there was already great dissatisfaction among the passengers and many of them called out for candles and made a great row, asking the conductor if he thought we were pigs, because we had to travel in the dark. But no one took any notice of that and we still did not get any light. That, however, was only the beginning of the tribulations of our long journey - but before long there was worse to come.

When the train arrived at the harbor, where we saw many lights on both sides but nothing else, it finally came to a stop. We alighted from the carriages and all that great throng of people pushed forward and we with them, though we did not know really where we were going: was it already to the ship or was something else going to happen to us? We were in a fearful crush and weighed down by our clothes and hanging on to the children (whom we dared not let go or we would have lost them in the dark night). On we went, further and further, until in the end we came to our ship. There, onto it from the land a long bridge was placed, which was fairly steep, but not greatly frightening. But below before the bridge there was a fearful throng, and if anyone lost anything there he could never get it back.

We got onto the ship safely, but we were constantly surprised that we had got through without mishap. There we immediately passed down two ladders to the steerage (Zwischendeck), where we should have been shown, as we thought, to our berths. But nothing of the kind happened. Everyone searched for his berth himself, wherever he liked, and those who arrived first chose the best places and kept them too. In Bremen they had told us that on the railway we should sit in the last carriages, because then those who were sitting in these carriages would get onto the ship first. But in Bremerhafen it turned out that it was not like that, but rather that those who had sat in the first carriages were also the first to get on the ship. And because we got onto the ship later, we had to stay in a place where we found no room for us and it was only after long searching that we finally found room in the forward part of the ship. This place, however, was in many respects not congenial, but we had to make the best of it, because in the steerage there was nothing better left.

But as soon as I saw the steerage my heart fell, for I had expected it would be quite different, that is to say much nicer than what I now saw. In the steerage everything was still in the most awful disorder. There were old boxes, barrels, ropes, poles and boards lying higgeldy-piggeldy. Old barrels of rotten herring were standing there, barrels of tar, of colophony, and all kinds of rubbish, so you could easily have broken a leg. Moreover, it stank terribly and worse than that the whole ship was full of so-called Russian cockroaches - eugh! I shook at the sight of such loathsomeness, especially when I thought I would have to live for a long time amidst such filth. - But that was weakness. I soon got used to it after the sailors, within a few days, had moved everything to one side, so that we could pass by without danger. The cockroaches, remained, it is true, but I learned to get on with them too, because they did me no harm, so I came to regard them as innocent little creatures, something like flies, and calmly lay down with them or without them in my bunk.

After we had deposited our outer clothes in this hellish abode, we returned straight away to the deck to get our straw sacks, on which we were to lie. But, oh dear, this was again an awful business; everyone was snatching at them and it was an indescribable muddle. First, everyone wanted to have his own sack, because on every sack a name was written, but with so many people and in such bad light it was impossible to find your own sack. I had bought two of these sacks in Bremen and had paid 2 thalers and 20 new silver groschen for them, but I could not see either of them and finally I realized I should have to take whatever I could get. But when I had carried the best one I could find into the steerage and had come up again, they had all been taken, and in the end I had to be glad that I had at least got one, though it was of poor quality. Others came off even worse; they had none at all. So I think there were people who had come on the ship without having bought one of these sacks, but during the distribution took somebody else's.

Early the next morning - it was a Sunday - we could look at our new abode in the light of day. The sailors had worked all night and on Sunday till midday to bring our chests and trunks from home onto the deck and then lower them through great holes (hatches) into the bottom of the ship. Although this was done with the help of steam engines and it is all arranged in a very practical way, it demands a great deal of time in view of such a multitude of clothes.

Our ship was a great steamer of unusual stateliness named 'Frankfurt' and she had been built in England in 1869. She was 340 feet long and 37 feet wide, and she was carrying over 800 passengers, so there were, counting the sailors, about 1000 people on board.

By noon that day all was ready and the ship cast off. To start with the journey was very pleasant, but as we got further out to sea, when land was no longer visible, the ship began to rock about a good deal, so before evening came, almost everyone was suffering from sea sickness. But you should have seen it! The sick passengers, especially the women, began to vomit pitifully and soon all the corners and nooks were full of emigrants holding chamber pots in their hands, others were sitting on the deck, in corridors and on the stairs, but - wherever you looked - everyone was vomiting violently. In my case, however, it did not come to that. I was only a little dizzy, my head ached, I was unsteady on my feet, I had no appetite and a feeling of revulsion - that was the extent of sea sickness in my case.

As I have already mentioned, we had rough weather early on the first evening, so immediately many people feared the ship might founder. On Monday and Tuesday we had a good wind, but the ship was pitching fearfully, so sometimes the sea water drenched us. But we preferred to remain on deck and, if possible, close to the engine, because it was warm there. In the first days our ship had travel led 75 German miles in a day and a night, but otherwise it travel led about 60 miles in 24 hours. On Sunday 30 October we rose at 6.45 and recalled that where you were it was 9 o'clock and that at that time you were already full of kermis cake and probably on your way to church. We had no cake and, what is more. our ship was rocking terribly. For lunch we had plenty of meat and a thin rice soup, but there was a shortage of places to sit. There were no tables or chairs and everyone had to find a place to sit. On days like that it was equally bad everywhere, because everywhere the ship was tossing about and everywhere the food was spilt.

When I had finally found a seat on a little box, where I could have lunch, there was a violent jolt from a great wave - and all the soup went over my Sunday trousers, so I lost my appetite.

Now It began to get a bit warmer, so that you could bear it on deck without an overcoat. During the rough weather we had on Sunday 30 October, we were terrified. Almost the whole time it was raining and that made the deck very slippery, so you could not stand on your feet unless you were holding on to something firm. I fell over several times and once I was rolling about on the deck. In the steerage it was much more dangerous; all the boxes and chests - big and small - had become detached and were falling and sliding in all directions, so there was dreadful confusion. Children were howling, women screaming, some men were whining and moaning, but others were laughing, as much as they could, and at these some others were complaining, because they could not understand how anyone could laugh in such danger; in short, there was a terrible row. On Monday 31 October we had fine weather but a head wind; nearly all the passengers came up on deck and soon no one was suffering from sea sickness.

Sometimes some passengers were dissatisfied with the food, because they did not like the taste. Most often we had beef with rice, and almost every day they gave us in addition whole potatoes, but not many - on the other hand, so much beef that we could mostly not eat it all. Furthermore, we had white beans or peas with meat, sometimes sauerkraut and bacon, also sometimes they gave us plums and sliced apples. We had meat every day, but the salted meat was usually so salty that we could not eat much, and the fresh meat was always slightly underdone. In the morning we received coffee and nice newly baked white bread, in the evening tea and black bread or white biscuits, or sometimes white bread too. We did not like the tea much. We always had enough water, but that too was sometimes fairly bad.

If there had not been so many people on the ship, it would have been much nicer for us, but anyone can easily understand what a crush it was before every meal, when so many people are to receive their food all at the same time. In the corridors (gangways) it was so hot you could faint and, especially at the beginning, there was no order or discipline, only later a kitchen officer established a little order.

In the second week of our journey we had fine weather and it was very warm, so on the deck we were always looking for the shade. It was now as hot as the weather you have in July; the children were barefooted and the adults were as lightly dressed as was proper. The ship proceeded very smoothly almost constantly and the evenings under the full moon were beautiful. On such evenings it was lively on deck until midnight or even later. Everywhere there were games and entertainment in various languages. In one place there was reading and singing, in another music and dancing. Here acquaintances were being made and there love was in the air. In the daytime women carried parasols and those that had none used umbrellas to defend themselves against the burning sun.

It was particularly hot in the steerage amidships near the engine, where many Czechs had their berths. I passed by there only once, but it was stifling and I thanked God that we had our berths in the forward part of the ship. Here it was better with the exception of those times when there was a strong wind and the ship dipped and rose up and down along its whole length. Then it seemed to us that we were in one moment flying into the clouds and in the next diving back into the sea. - But when the ship rocked from side to side, then things were the same anywhere on board. When it was rocking like that, I sometimes had to lie in my bunk and hold on so tight with my hands that my fingers were cracking. Otherwise, I would have been thrown out of my bunk.

Here I should mention that we did not pass through the so-called channel, but sailed around Scotland, which happened (it was said) so that French warships should not attack our German vessel. This made our journey last 24 hours longer.

On Friday 11 November we saw land. It was the shore of one of the Bahama Islands and we first saw a lighthouse built there. Within an hour we came so close that we could easily see the waves breaking on the rocks. It was a fine view, especially because the sea was calm and the sun was just rising from the opposite side.

On this day at midday it was very hot and we proceeded past various islands, rocks, and lighthouses, coming particularly close to a little island with a fine lighthouse, so that we could easily see people walking about there. The whole island was probably no more than ¼ hour [= one mile] long.

On Saturday 12 November we passed by many lighthouses and soon we saw land continually. There seems to be a sprinkling of islands and rocks in the sea here and in rough weather it is very dangerous for ships passing here, especially for sailing ships. Our steamship, on account of the excellent weather, had taken this shorter course, for otherwise steamers on their way usually stop for a while in Havana, but we did not see anything of the island of Cuba at all, which we passed on our left in the distance. We were here in the Gulf of Mexico and constantly had good weather; it was so hot that some of us slept at night on the deck of the ship without covering.

So America was now close to us and on Monday 14 November in the morning the first pilots came towards us, so as to guide our ship into the harbor, but our captain did not want any of them, so they sailed away again and we soon lost sight of them. The sea here has quite a different color, it is yellowish green, whereas further from the land the water is dark blue. At 12.30 p.m. on this day we passed the so-called bars or sand banks at the mouth of the River Mississippi. Now the view changed; ahead right beside the sea was a little town where the pilots are said to live and on both sides you could see land, which was quite flat and without bushes. There was only high grass and reeds here, and on both sides quantities of wood had been deposited, that is to say thousands and thousands of trees, which the river had brought down and they had remained lying or floating at its mouth.

Further up-river there were bushes on the banks and then sturdy trees, but the banks were occupied by nice houses, around which stood bushes or orange trees. There are also many houses there in which negroes live. The voyage up this river to New Orleans is beautiful and it was only a pity that it took place partly in the dark, when we could see nothing. New Orleans lies some 120 English miles inland from the place where the River Mississippi empties into the sea. And because we docked in New Orleans at 1 o'clock at night, we could not see the first part of our river journey. The same happened to us again, when we passed down the River Mississippi from New Orleans harbor to get to Galveston, because our ship left New Orleans in the evening and we again could see nothing in the night.

The writer of this letter is a Wend and he has moved from the Wendish land to Serbin. Unfortunately, the editor of the "Serbske Nowiny" did not publish the remainder of the letter, if there was one.

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