

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Die Gustloff (The Gustloff)

Director: Joseph Vilsmaier

Original Music: Christian Heyne

Cinematography: Jörg Widmer

Released: 2008

Cast: Kai Wiesinger (Hellmut Kehding); Valerie Niehaus (Erika Galetschky); Heiner Lauterbach (Harald Kehding); Dana Vavrova (Lilli Simoneit); Michael Mendl (Kapitän Johannsen); Karl Markovics (Korvettenkapitän Petri); Nicolas Solar Lozier (Heinz Schön); Detlev Buck (Hagen Koch); Ulrike Kriener (Berta Burkat)

Precis – Allen Krumm

There is a haunting ballad by Gordon Lightfoot called *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald*. The song is about an ore freighter which goes down during a terrible storm on Lake Superior. It is a very sad tale, which really happened, and Lightfoot's artistry has indelibly imprinted the memory of that ship in the public mind since he wrote the song in 1976. All hands were lost – all 29 of them.

There are other ships possessing renown far beyond that of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*: the *Titanic*, the *Lusitania* and the *Bismarck*, among others. We remember these vessels because of the singular fate each one possesses. The *Wilhelm Gustloff* is not ranked among such legendary ships, and it does not have a song, but considering the multiple incarnations of its brief lifespan and the nature of its demise, one could understandably suppose this latter ship deserves both a ranking and a song.

For the first two years of its career, the *Gustloff* was a cruise ship, hauling cargoes of strength and joy to the Mediterranean and along the Norwegian fiords. It was the pride of the *Deutschen Arbeitsfront*. With the outbreak of war, the *Gustloff* briefly became a hospital ship and then a floating barracks for sailors in training. Its last role was to serve as a *Fluchtschiff*, transporting sailors and desperate refugees from Gotenhafen to western ports such as Kiel and Flensburg. As it turned out, there was to be only one performance.

Joseph Vilsmaier's film about the *Gustloff's* doomed final voyage is unfortunately perhaps over fictionalized in some respects. Some of the main characters are inventions, and the outlooks and actions of the two commanding officers (Kapitän Johanson was actually named Friederich Peterson and Kapitän Petri was Wilhelm Zahn) seem to have been tailored to serve the needs of the storyline. Yet Vilsmaier nonetheless captures the atmosphere of desperation among the throngs of refugees seeking some means of escape to the west.

The contradictory exigencies of war presented the real life *Kapitäne* Petersen and Zahn with a hard choice: *Tiefwasserweg* or *Küstenweg*. Should the *Gustloff* go through deep water to get the sailors to Kiel as quickly as possible and avoid the mines littering the coast, or pursue a slow course along the coast, with escort ships, where it would be difficult if not impossible for Soviet U-boats to approach them? Petersen and Zahn, apparently against the advice of first officer Reese and navigation *Kapitäne* Harry Weller and Heinz Kohler, eventually agreed on a deep water course.

As the *Gustloff* ploughed through the rough seas that evening of January 30th 1945, the voice of the *Führer* was broadcast throughout the ship. January 30th was the twelfth anniversary of the *Machtergreifung* of the Party. Reportedly, as the officers dined and listened, Zahn made an accurate but slightly premature observation after listening to the position report of 2nd officer Vollrath: "*Stimmt – morgen früh haben wir die gefährlichste Strecke hinter uns.*" Receiving a radio message about German minesweepers coming towards them from the west, *Kapitän* Petersen made the decision to turn on his position lights, fearing that otherwise one of the minesweepers might collide with the *Gustloff*.

Zahn, a former U-Boot *Kapitän* himself, did not favor this action, knowing position lights would make them vulnerable to an enemy U-boat. But Petersen prevailed, and the lights were turned on. Although Vilsmaier's script heavily implies deliberate deception, it seems no one knows for sure to this day whether the radio report about the allegedly approaching minesweepers involved sabotage, or a simple misunderstanding.

There was only one *Kapitän* aboard Soviet U-Boot 13, and he had only one goal. Alexander Marinesco, a hard drinking man prone to overstepping the bounds of discipline and to clashes with his superiors, needed to score on this mission in order to compensate for a slew of recent troubles. U-Boot 13 had been on the hunt for 19 days now.

At about 19:00 hours on the 30th of January, the watchman on U-boat 13 saw the lights of a large ship. He awoke Marinesco, who peered through the periscope, and knew he was looking at the means of his *beruflichen* comeback. U-Boot 13, after running fast on the surface in a very daring maneuver to get around behind and reach the coastal side of the ship, proceeded to track this prey for two hours.

The log book of U-13 is brief and to the point. At 21:00 Marinesco ordered Wladimir Kourotschkin to fire four (some accounts say three) torpedoes from a distance of roughly 600 meters. One misfired, but the other three all hit the target. The target immediately began to sink.

Historical statistics can be, and often are, fraught with controversy. Some wax, some wane, some remain remarkably constant. The numbers for the *Gustloff* have been on the rise over the past decade. According to the most recent estimates, Marinesco's target very probably held over 10,000 human beings.

No one knows the number for sure, but it is certain that nearly half of the passengers were children. Despite the best efforts of directors like Vilsmaier and Frank Wisbar (who told the story in the 1959 movie *Nacht fiel über Gotenhafen*), ultimately it seems pointless to attempt to dramatize the surplus of suffering and dying that took place in the next few hours. Roughly 1250 people survived.

The *Gustloff* still doesn't have a song, but it has begun to accumulate books. Heinz Schön, the young apprentice purser who survived that terrible night, devoted the rest of his life to researching and recording the history of naval war in the Baltic Sea during that last winter of the war. His special emphasis was on the *Gustloff*. He even managed to track down and meet Mr. Kourotschkin. A photo has captured the two gentlemen exchanging a handshake of reconciliation.

In 2002, Günter Grass published his novel *Im Krebsgang*, an imaginative retelling of the *Gustloff* tragedy. There

was a considerable contingent of military personnel on board, so the question arises: was the sinking of this ship a war crime? Grass apparently did not think so; in an interview he commented that one of his motivations in writing the novel was "...to take the subject away from the extreme right... They said the tragedy of the *Gustloff* was a war crime. It wasn't. It was terrible, but it was a result of war, a terrible result of war." Whether one agrees with Grass or not, the merit of his work lies in its focus on the long lingering *Nachwirkung* of history itself. At the end of the narrative, his protagonist says "*Das hört nicht auf. Nie hört das auf.*", seemingly echoing the immortal insight of William Faulkner: "The past is not dead. It is not even past."