

LL
15 December 1951
VI/R/4/1683POLANDCOMMUNICATIONSWaterwaysDelivery Of "Sobieski" To Soviets At ODESSA

SOURCE ROME: A sailor who jumped ship in Scandinavia previously aboard "Sobieski" when it was handed over to the Soviets at ODESSA.
DATE OF OBSERVATION: March - April 1950, recently reported.

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A Polish Merchant Marine person who was aboard the M/S "Sobieski" when it was delivered to the Soviets at ODESSA told the following story:

"We left NAPLES on the night of 15 March 1950, and sailed for ODESSA. During the voyage there was a strange atmosphere aboard ship. It seemed as though we had forgotten to speak. No one wanted to eat, and the ship was strangely silent. No one even cursed, and this was a sure sign that something was wrong. When the ship was near the Black Sea, rumors spread among the seamen that the captain of the "Sobieski" had received a cable from the Harbor-Office of ODESSA to the effect that the Soviet "masters" had sent a pilot out to meet us. Today I can see that this was merely a product of the imagination, because at that time no one came out to meet us, let alone a pilot.

We reached ODESSA by night, but we did not get permission to enter the harbor. No port official came out to meet us and we were forced to wait all night for orders to enter the port. The captain repeatedly flashed messages to the port authorities, but he never got an answer. Next morning the Soviet pilot came out to meet us and guided us into the harbor. There was no band on the pier; no symbolic flowers; no smiles. The "welcome" was so cold and formal that one would have thought we had brought them a cholera epidemic instead of an ocean liner. On the first day the captain and crew were obliged to confine themselves to one part of the ship and were not permitted to move about freely. This was evidently a "security" measure. We were not allowed ashore the first night because the port authorities claimed that our permits were not ready.

Soviet police carefully searched the ship and confiscated some Nylon stockings and dollars which some of the crew had with them. The Soviets claimed that these articles were not listed in the ship's manifest. Oddly enough the Soviets never asked for this manifest, but they use any excuse to do as they please. They did not seal the liquor and cigarettes we had aboard ship as is done in other ports. The Soviets claimed that "no one in the Soviet Union desired American cigarettes or French liquor." During the next few days we found that the opposite was true, and that the Soviet people loved these capitalistic products. In fact they paid more for the cheapest stockings than did people in any other port. This situation made our little trips to town very profitable.

ODESSA is not an attractive city; there are no beautiful bars and restaurants. They are all ordinary, dirty places, and people are sullen, expressionless, and never seem to smile.

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On the second day in port the Soviets began to test the engines forward for 45 minutes, then in reverse full down; the ship was put through all possible maneuvers. The "Sobieski" came through with flying colors, so that even the most exacting Soviet engineers had nothing to object. The trial runs lasted a day and a half, and the Soviets seemed completely satisfied with their purchase. After the trial run we went through 14 days of handing-over ceremonies. The Soviets wanted to learn as much as they could about the machinery aboard.

Getting back to the city itself: I repeat, the city was lifeless and colorless. Perhaps in 1914 it was beautiful but not today. It has no international characteristics as one would imagine in such a port. Some English ships put into ODESSA, but the sailors do not go ashore. There are no Americans at all, perhaps one can see some Greek seamen.

Our Stula (ship's education officer - source's note) tried to make the best of the situation. He organized a visit to the Ex-Italian ship "Patria" now called "Rossija," which was tied up in the port. He took us to the movies, to the theater, etc.

Walking through the streets one does not see any drunks, and it seems as though good-humor is unknown in this city.

It almost seems that someone had forbidden conversation in town. I met a Russian whom I had known in GENOA during the handing over of the S/S "Jagiello". He was not allowed to come aboard the "Sobieski," so I spoke to him in a dark corner of the port where no one could see us. I made an appointment with him for the next day, but he did not show up. I thus lost my only contact with our "allies."

The movies are not entertaining at all. They are schools for Soviet culture and not amusement centers. The same is true for the opera, with the exception that the opera house is beautiful, somewhat like the Burgtheater in VIENNA. Singers, technique and scenery are good, but not really outstanding. The audience is well-behaved, but people come dressed any way they wish. Only the Navy and Air Force officers give a European touch to the crowd.

I never got the chance to see the famous Russian hospitality; if it ever existed, it has probably been liquidated

It is the custom to organize a party aboard ship to celebrate the delivery of a ship. The Soviets showed no intention of doing so, and therefore we made the preparations for the farewell party. When the Soviets saw what we had in mind they contributed a bottle of vodka for each table. Many port officials came aboard in shining uniforms, and every few minutes they made the usual Soviet toasts; but no one got drunk because it is hard to get drunk on five little glasses of vodka. During the party we were all very tense

Then the Polish flag was lowered, and it was like listening to a death sentence. Our sailors were silent and swallowed hard in order to keep from crying. They did not want the Soviets to catch them crying.....

Of course, none of us chose freedom in ODESSA(irony - source's note.)

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We returned to Poland via KIJOW, BRZESC and TERESPOL.

BRZESC, which is in Soviet-Poland, has been completely sovietized, whereas TERESPOL, which is farther west, still has some European traits.

EVAL. COMMENT: Probably true; the description of the crew's only natural reaction and the description of ODESSA are genuine.