

Never Let a Chance Go by Beulah Gross

The value of researching apparently unimportant snippets of information was brought home to me quite forcefully when an idle comment resulted in a flood of fascinating information. My maternal grandmother, Henny Ausbruch nee Eliasov, arrived in Port Elizabeth, South Africa from Libau on September 3, 1902 with her mother and five young brothers. She told us that she'd celebrated her nineteenth birthday on 12 August, during the voyage.

Throughout her long life Henny often told her children and grandchildren stories about the family she had left behind in Libau (Liepaja), Riga and Berlin. These stories, enhanced by photographs bearing the names of the subjects, were the basis of my maternal family history. Henny often related the story of her sea voyage from Libau to England and from there to South Africa. She occasionally mentioned, almost in passing, that she had arrived in Port Elizabeth during a fierce storm. No one ever asked her to elaborate on this, probably because she didn't seem to think it was important. Also, her stories were viewed just as stories, figments of her imagination, bobbemaise.

In one of my numerous letters (this was before emails) to Liz E, my research contact in Port Elizabeth, I commented casually that we regarded this storm as family lore rather than fact. Within a fortnight I received a photocopy from Liz of the *Eastern Province Herald* published on September 3, 1902. It tells of the havoc caused by a hurricane, known as 'The Great Gale', which raged in the area from August 31 to September 2, 1902. The flowery, sometimes purple prose of the article tells of horrific destruction and incredible heroism during the storm which killed 58 people, wrecked or sank 21 ships and left ten ships still unaccounted for. Liz also sent a photocopy of an article in the *Eastern Province Herald* dated September 5, 1992. This article commemorates the 90th anniversary of 'The Great Gale' and reproduces photographs of wrecks found on Port Elizabeth beaches after the storm had abated.

Both articles mention that passengers were transferred from the ships on a bosun's chair to a lighter which took them ashore and this jogged my memory. Henny had indeed described this several times, saying that she was the only one who had enjoyed this dangerous ride and wanted to do it again.

By a process of elimination, Liz discovered that Henny had travelled from England to South Africa in a Castle Line ship named *Raglan Castle*. She then found, in an old book she found in someone's trash, a picture of a sister ship, *Donottar Castle* and a list of the names and sizes of eighteen of the ships comprising the Castle fleet. According to this list *Raglan Castle* was a mere 4324 tons.

This information added colour and life to the family history. In particular, my beloved grandmother's diamantine life gained another facet which I have been privileged to share. This surprising result from a chance comment has made me realise that every detail, however trivial it may seem, should be investigated to the fullest extent of the imagination and curiosity of all genealogy researchers.

Try it. You never know what you might find.

Never Let A Chance Go By by Beulah Gross

Written October 1993; Revised September 2022 and March 2024.

Posted on the CHOL Share Your Stories Website in April, 2024