

My Formative Years is a first-hand account of Sir John Pitka's 1896-1900 voyages as master of barque Lilly. Having responsibility for a ship, crew and cargo required leadership and Pitka's narrative shows how he developed the initiative, decision making skills and confidence seen later during WWI and while homesteading in Canada.

MY FORMATIVE YEARS:

Master of barque Lilly 1896-1900

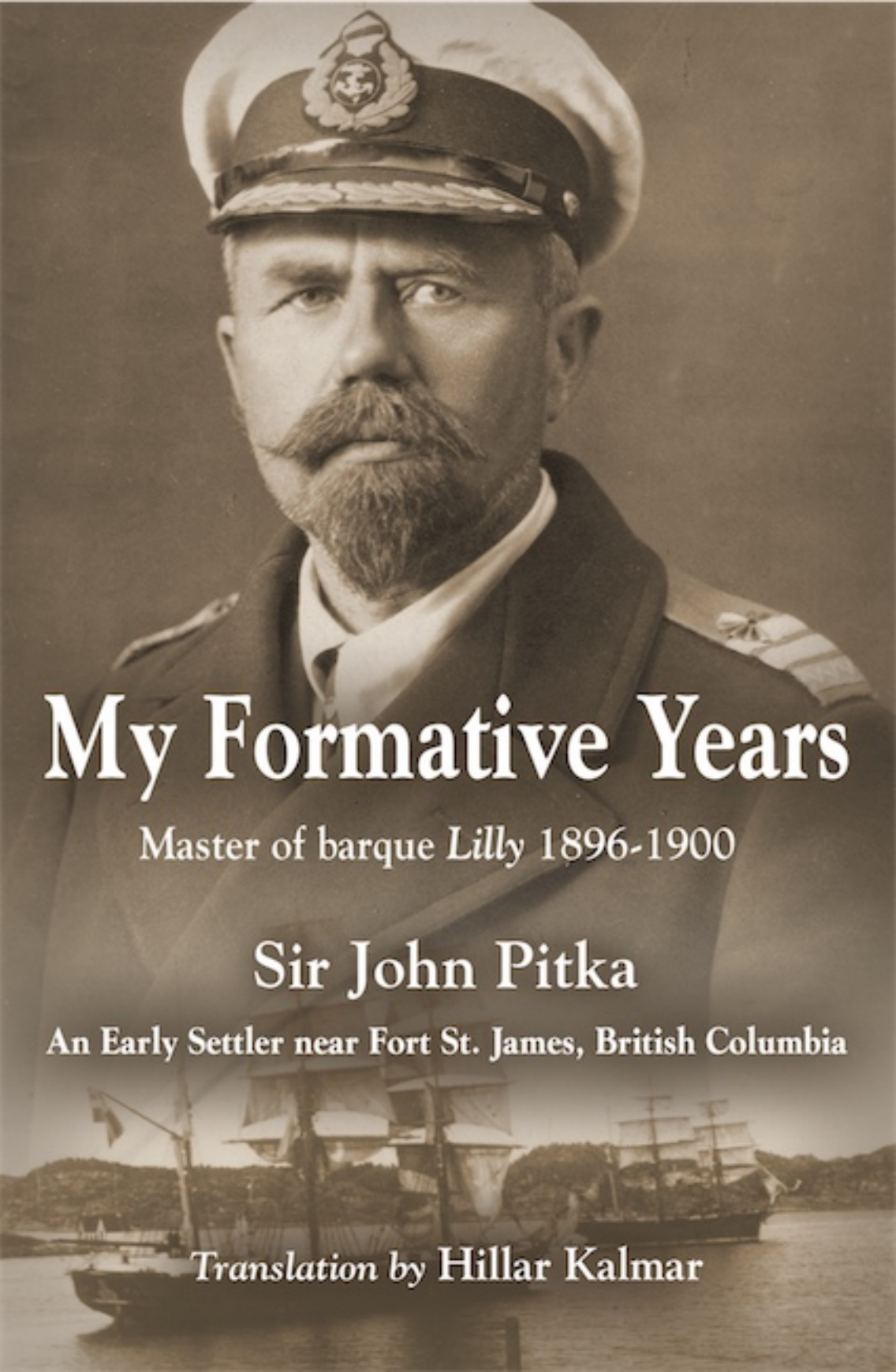
by Sir John Pitka

Translation by Hillar Kalmar

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My Formative Years

Master of barque *Lilly* 1896-1900

Sir John Pitka

An Early Settler near Fort St. James, British Columbia



Translation by Hillar Kalmar

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My Formative Years by Sir John Pitka
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1 Buying a ship in Germany

Hamburg

The port in Lübeck, Germany was very busy. Although many piers lined the banks of the Trave and Wakenitz rivers, all moorages were occupied by small steamships, sailboats or river barges. The cleanliness and refined construction of these watercraft made them much nicer than our Baltic coastal vessels.

At one time, Lübeck had been the largest and most powerful member of the Hanseatic League.³ The town still looked impressive and its ornate old gothic buildings projected businesslike practicality. They contained offices and storerooms that belonged to merchants.

Travelling on to Hamburg, another old Hanseatic city, my memory of Lübeck was soon eclipsed by the tremendous activity taking place here, the largest port in Europe. Compared with Hamburg, Lübeck provided only a tiny glimpse into the ancient beginnings of maritime commerce.

An enormous amount of activity was taking place in Hamburg's large shipping offices, vast warehouses and on the piers jutting into the Elbe River. Traffic on the waterway included large sailing ships and steamships, mixed in with ordinary ocean-going vessels and both canal and river barges. The barges moved under their own power or with help from tugboats, of which there were hundreds. All this activity merged to become the rhythmic heartbeat of European commerce, a heart whose blood comprised wheat, fruit, Chilean saltpeter, petroleum, tobacco, colonial goods from distant lands and industrial goods to all corners of the earth, along with endless migrants.

At the offices of Miller & Co., the shipbroker that my employer, Mr. Meyer, had engaged for purchasing a ship, I was greeted by Mr. Miller himself. He was a portly old man in poor health. Miller introduced me to one of his staff, a large, full-bearded Norwegian. This man spoke a mixture of German and Norwegian, making it obvious he had only been in Hamburg a short while.

³ The Hanseatic League was a powerful economic and defensive alliance of market towns and trading guilds that dominated commerce in Northern Europe from 1400 to 1800.

The three of us took a small steamer to view the ships that were for sale as, in 1896, motorboats had yet to appear in Hamburg.

We saw brigs and barkentines suitable for Baltic and North Sea voyages, but their prices were high, and buyers so numerous there was little hope of getting a good price.⁴

Especially attractive was a brig belonging to Borchardt, the well-known old German shipowner. His firm was selling its last wooden sailing ship and switching to steamships. The brig looked in good shape for ocean travel and seemed built for speed. This was confirmed in her logbook by the ship's recent voyage from Maracaibo (in the West-Indies) to Hamburg carrying a cargo of divi-divi pods, and thousands of thumb-sized cockroaches that were now gnawing hungrily on bamboo mats that lined the ship's hold.⁵

After exchanging telegrams with Mr. Meyer about this ship and then making an offer to buy it, we learned that another buyer had offered more, and the ship had been sold to them.

Ebba, a Swedish barque, had recently arrived from the Yucatan and was almost finished unloading her cargo of logwood.^{6,7} Her master, Captain Hansson, an old grey-haired man, was also represented by Miller. After hearing that I was in Hamburg to buy a ship, Hansson came to see me. He said *Ebba* was for sale and he was the ship's largest shareholder. His asking price was close to what Meyer had decided to spend on another vessel.

On our way to inspect *Ebba*, I was happy to see the ship *Salme* from my homeland in the harbour and we pulled beside her for a visit. *Salme*'s captain, an older man named Sandstrom, remembered meeting me before and kindly invited us aboard. I explained my business in Hamburg and asked if he wanted to come along to see *Ebba* and he agreed to join us.

After thoroughly inspecting *Ebba* and reviewing her papers, I learned that copper sheathing had been placed on her hull up to the ballast line the

⁴ A brig is a two-masted, square-rigged sailing ship. A barkentine is a sailing ship with 3 or more masts that is square-rigged only on the foremast.

⁵ Divi-divi pods come from a tropical shrub and are a source of tannin.

⁶ A barque is a sailing ship with 3 or more masts that is square-rigged on all masts except the one closest to the stern.

⁷ Logwood, a source of reddish-brown dye, is a tree found in the Caribbean and Central America.

previous year. *Ebba* had been built in Sunderland, U.K. in 1866 using greenheart wood, oak and copper bolts, to a size of 415 gross registered tons and a carrying capacity of about 700 tons, with length 127.1 ft., beam 28.4 ft. and depth 17.4 ft. Bureau Veritas, the French surveying firm, had rated *Ebba* *A.II, the highest sailing-ship classification for transatlantic voyages. Including her deck, rigging, sails and other equipment, *Ebba* was in good all-around condition. Her original name had been *Meridian*.

Looking at her silhouette, *Ebba* was pleasing to the eye and left the impression she would be a good ship to sail on the ocean. We found entries in her logbook where she had covered up to 50 miles in one watch, meaning she could travel at speeds up to 12 knots.⁸

When I asked Captain Sandstrom his opinion of *Ebba*, he thought she was better than the other ships for sale and worth more than her asking price. I had been thinking the same thing.

Ebba had been chartered to take lumber from Norrköping, Sweden to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and then for a return charter carrying logwood from Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula to Genoa, Italy. Both of the charter party contracts were economically reasonable for the charter market at that time.

After I sent Mr. Meyer a lengthy telegram, he agreed to make an offer for *Ebba* provided I was willing to go on the long voyages she had been chartered for.

During our negotiations over the ship, Captain Hansson reduced his asking price by 10% and, in the end, we signed a buy-sell agreement. This said that he and his crew would sail *Ebba* to Norrköping and I would pay him 500 Swedish crowns to do so. I would also cover the cost of a tugboat to tow us through the Kiel Canal.⁹

While coming to an agreement, ballast had been loaded aboard *Ebba* and she was getting ready to leave port. Because I would also be leaving aboard the ship when she sailed, I decided to invite Captain Sandstrom to dinner. While we were eating, I asked what he thought of my upcoming long voyages and whether he believed I had signed on for more than I could

⁸ A maritime watch was 4 hours long.

⁹ The Kiel Canal is a 60-mile long canal through NW Germany that connects the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. The canal dates to the 1700's and was used to avoid the often dangerous 285-mile journey around Denmark's Jutland Peninsula.

handle. Usually reserved and sparing of speech, Sandstrom now became animated. He said ocean crossings were much easier than coastal voyages which, although shorter, required many changes in course near rugged or shallow coastlines, and frequent waits in port, that rarely left much time to rest. Whenever he reached the open ocean, however, he usually had the ship's log-line put away because it wouldn't be needed until they reached the distant coastline.¹⁰ Days spent on ocean crossings were his rest days. Regarding myself, he said my several years of experience as a captain would be more helpful in managing the other duties and responsibilities now expected of me than if I'd been sailing on oceans for the same time as a mate.

I thanked the old grey captain for his encouraging words. Sandstrom also said that I'd be in a much better position than he, because I had a proper sailing ship to command, but he had a schooner, whose rigging was inferior. He'd let *Salme's* owner know that she should be rigged as a barkentine, but his advice had been ignored. Sandstrom had been sailing across the ocean for many years on ships that had fore-and-aft sails and, in his view, this was not the best rigging for an ocean-going ship.

I had a warm parting with this honourable gentleman. He had once been captain of barque *Linda Aleksander*, whose voyages I had followed with interest for years in newspapers before going to sea. This parting was our last as I never saw him again.

Captain Sandstrom died a symbol to duty off the coast of Falmouth, England while I was in Venezuela with my new ship. In ill health when his ship left North America on her return voyage, Sandstrom hoped to recover on one of his beloved ocean crossings, but this did not happen.

Unfortunately, Sandstrom had an inept mate, in whose hands he didn't trust leaving the ship, so despite his fragile health he had frequently been on deck taking observations to determine the ship's position and giving orders to adjust her course. He finally became so weak that sailors had to carry him on deck in a bedsheet to measure the angle of the sun. Then he calculated a new course while lying in bed. Sandstrom made his final

¹⁰ A log-line was a cord attached to a chip log (or ship log - not to be confused with a ship's logbook) and was used to measure a ship's speed.

observation and last calculation in the mouth of the English Channel. When *Salme* reached the coast off Falmouth to wait for docking instructions, Sandstrom peacefully closed his eyes after hearing the anchor being lowered. His great sense of duty had given him the strength to resist dying until his ship arrived safely at her destination.

Sandstrom had been a fine man, an honest, responsible mariner that I'd had the good fortune and pleasure of knowing and learning from when I needed guidance. He rests near the Isle of Wight in the English Channel and my memories of him are good ones.

Before leaving Hamburg, I received a lengthy letter from Meyer. He was amazed that I'd agreed to go on such a long voyage and said that he, his wife and some friends were going to meet us in Norrköping to give his ship a new name.

The Kiel Canal

Barque *Ebba* was a family ship. The captain was her largest shareholder and his close relatives held the other shares. Captain Hansson's eldest son was the ship's mate, his middle son was the boatswain and his youngest son was an ordinary sailor.

Hansson's wife and daughter had travelled to Hamburg to meet his ship and sail back to Norrköping aboard her. This resulted in *Ebba*'s cabin turning into hotel of sorts. In addition to the regulars, the captain, mate, boatswain and cook, were the captain's wife, his daughter and I. Things were re-arranged so we all fit comfortably into the cabin. I shared a room with the mate, the boatswain shared a room with the cook, the captain and his wife had the bedroom and their daughter occupied the saloon. In addition to those mentioned, there were countless other travelers aboard, namely cockroaches. These looked like the same species I had seen aboard Borchardt's ship, except a bit smaller and faster moving. Swedes called them *kackerlacka*, Germans called them *die Schäbe* and those in Central America called them by their Spanish name, *cucaracha*.

At meal times, the mess teemed with cockroaches and eating was a battle between us and them. It was customary aboard *Ebba* not to kill insects, so everyone fended for themselves and politely flicked them from

the food on their plates as best they could. The more aggressive cockroaches climbed up to the ceiling, from where they fell into bowls of broth and onto spoons that people were holding up to their mouths. Cockroaches were quickly rescued from the hot soup by hands, forks or spoons so they wouldn't die. We ate as quickly as possible, doing our best not to let the circumstances spoil our appetites, nor wishing to prolong the meal before letting our fellow travellers attack whatever food might have been left over. We learned to be careful and resourceful, in the same way that Mother Nature helps her children with their evolution. That the cockroaches seemed as happy and quick-footed when they were upside down on the ceiling as they were on the floor, was a gift from Mother Nature. She had given them feet that provided a vacuum-like grip. From this perspective, cockroaches were more advanced than humans and the Swedes' respect for them wasn't unfounded.

After Captain Hansson obtained clearance for *Ebba* to leave port, he piled gifts that he'd acquired from abroad for his wife and daughter onto the cabin table. A tugboat and pilot soon appeared beside the ship and we left the forest of masts behind and were carried downstream in the river current. We passed hundreds of ships of all types that were forging upstream against the force of the Elbe River.

A large, steel-hulled, ocean-going vessel moved slowly downstream in front of us. The ship had five steel masts and was guided by half a dozen large tugs, some that were in front of it and some that came behind. The ship's rigging included steel topmasts, stays, tackle, shrouds and yards, along with hundreds of pulleys that made it resemble a forest of steel interlaced with white manila ropes.

Our barque and her three masts became dwarfed by this gigantic ocean ship as we approached her. Size wise, *Ebba* could have been the large ship's lifeboat and, indeed, would have fit nicely on the deck of the leviathan. In addition to the barque now seeming small, we all felt like we had shrunk and become thumb-sized.

When I looked up, however, and saw that people on the gigantic ship's deck and in her rigging also appeared to be thumb-sized like us, I didn't feel as small any more. We moved downstream faster than the gigantic ship

and after pulling ahead of her, our barque seemed to grow until everything soon appeared normal again.

After reaching Brunsbüttel, Germany at the mouth of the Kiel Canal, a large number of small river boats gathered around us. They were also waiting to enter the canal. It seemed odd that even though the river boats were the same size relative to *Ebba* that *Ebba* had been with respect to the steel giant we recently passed, the difference in relative size didn't seem the same.

When we asked permission to transit the canal, the officials said we would be the first large sailing ship to do so. They asked Captain Hansson to measure *Ebba*'s height from the water line to the top of her highest mast. Doing this showed she would have 15 feet of clearance from the bottom of the lowest bridge that crossed the canal.

As we approached the first bridge, however, we all thought the bridge would shear off the tops of our masts, along with the royal and topgallant yards. The pilot stopped the tugboat, so we could re-measure the height of the mainmast. Its height was found to be the same as before. Still, we felt something dreadful would happen as we passed beneath the bridge. When nothing did, and the ship quickly passed beneath it like a rabbit running through a gap, we felt embarrassed and ashamed of being needlessly afraid.

The first place we stopped to let oncoming vessels pass was at a dairy near Schleswig. All its workers came outside in their snow-white clothes and rushed to the side of the canal to see our 'large' ship. The captain took this opportunity to buy some whipped cream and a few pails of cold, sweet milk and have them brought on board. They tasted especially good in the warm weather.

Late that night the tug pulled *Ebba* through what used to be a churchyard. The church was on one side of the canal and the pastor's home was on the other side. The pastor and his wife were sitting in front of their home watching the ship, which momentarily blocked their view of the church. The moon had risen and was shining on the grass and the leaves on the trees, on whose branches nightingales were singing. In the dim light and stillness, their songs merged into a single melody. This had such a profound effect on the sailors, who for many months had seen only the ocean and sky

and heard only the whisper of winds and murmur of waves, that it moved them to tears.

After reaching the other end of the canal in Holtenau, near Kiel, we obtained our exit permit and passed through some narrows that led to the Bay of Kiel. As the tugboat released the tow rope, we set our sails to continue the voyage. I took every opportunity to learn as much as I could about *Ebba's* rigging.

Captain Hansson, though old and bothered by rheumatism, was very approachable and kind in every way. After giving me his sail-plan for *Ebba*, almost as a bonus for agreeing to buy the ship, he explained what I should be aware of so good quality sails were always sewn for her. *Ebba's* sails fit her very well and after absorbing Hansson's advice I was always able to ensure that good sails were made for her. This gave better control of the ship, greater speed and they also looked nicer.

In addition to his pointers about *Ebba's* sails, Captain Hansson gave me many other good tips that I took note of and was later able to use.

Norrköping, Sweden

After arriving in Norrköping, Captain Hansson obtained clearance for *Ebba* to enter port. We then went to the nearest government office and presented the buy-sell agreement to have *Ebba* stricken from the Swedish ship registry. After this we visited the Russian Consul's office to get temporary papers for the ship.¹¹ We also advised the head longshoreman that the ship now had a new owner. As soon as *Ebba's* ballast was unloaded, her new charter party cargo started to be loaded aboard. Captain Hansson paid off his crew members and sent them home, except for the mate who remained on board to supervise the loading while I waited for my mate and crew to arrive from Tallinn.

Hansson had already gathered his belongings and was leaving the ship with his wife and daughter when the ship's new crew arrived. They brought a note from Meyer saying that no qualified mates were available in Tallinn and I would need to find one here.

¹¹ Russia took over Sweden's dominions after prevailing in the Great Northern War and the Baltic nations of Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania fell under Russian rule until the end of WWI.

After searching unsuccessfully in Norrköping and Stockholm, I had to ask *Ebba's* mate to stay on board until we reached Copenhagen, where I would surely be able to find a new mate.

The men sent from the seafarer's hall in Tallinn were quite inexperienced. Only two of them, the boatswain and an old carpenter, had experience aboard square-rigged ships. Also, the carpenter had spent the last 20 years working in the harbour and had forgotten almost everything he knew about being aboard a ship. Three other men had been at sea and another one had worked aboard a ship for a few months. The three remaining men, and one boy, had never worked aboard a ship before. No cook was among them, so one of the young men would need to learn this skill.

The crew was definitely below average. The carpenter had a sullen disposition and was lazy. The boatswain seemed impatient and narrow-minded and, according to rumour, had once badly beaten an apprentice for using some thread that belonged to him. Of the others, only the sailmaker, a sailor and a landlubber appeared to be sensible, hardworking men. It seemed I would have difficulties with this crew and, indeed, trouble soon began.

Mr. Meyer arrived at the ship a short time later with his banker, Mr. Hoeppener, a doctor and a fourth man, all of whom brought their wives along. A ceremony to re-name the ship started right away.

We had raised the ship's flags as soon as the dignitaries arrived and laid food out on the cabin table without being bothered by any cockroaches. This was possible only because I had prepared a special feast for the insects as soon as Captain Hansson and his family left the ship. I purchased some Paris green, copper acetoarsenite, mixed plenty of table sugar into it and then placed it on the table for the cockroaches. The next morning, silence governed the cabin, the galley, the storeroom and the crew's quarters. The cook's workload increased though, as he now had to gather up the dead insects.

After the table was set, Mrs. Hoeppener smashed a bottle of champagne against the capstan and renamed the ship *Lilly*. A flag bearing the ship's new name was raised to the top of the mainmast and the nameplate

displaying *Ebba fran Visby* was removed from the stern and replaced by one with *Lilly von Reval* on it.¹² Afterwards, photographs of the ship were taken with both crew and visitors and then we all sat down at the table. Mr. Meyer spoke warmly and expressed good wishes for the long voyage ahead of us. Our visitors left that evening and we resumed loading the ship and getting ready to leave port. We decided not to buy most of the provisions needed for crossing the Atlantic until we reached Copenhagen's tax-free port, where goods were cheaper.

Trouble before our journey begins

After the crew chose what gear they needed for the voyage, I settled the bills and gave them money to buy miscellaneous goods while we got ready to sail. Then the carpenter and Peter, one of the men who had not been to sea before, came to see me and said they were returning to Tallinn. I firmly explained this was no longer an option, but with nervous laughter they said, "You can't stop us" and left the ship. It turned out the carpenter knew a little Swedish and had already sold his new gear to raise money for their trip back home.

I reported this to the police and said I would permit both men to come back to the ship, and this is what happened. The men had been gone less than an hour when two Swedish constables brought them back and then stayed to keep watch until we sailed. With more help from the police, I also recovered the gear sold by the runaways and fortunately the men had not spent any of the money they'd received.

Before travelling to Hamburg, the police in Tallinn had me sign a document agreeing to appear for military training aboard a naval ship that fall. After finding a ship in Hamburg for my employer to buy, it was clear that I wouldn't be able to start my training as planned. I wrote to my brother and asked him to see if the Defense Ministry would defer my training obligation and, if not, what the penalty for not showing up that fall would be.

¹² *Ebba*'s home port was Visby, on Sweden's Gotland Island and *Lilly*'s home port became Tallinn, Estonia's capital, although in 1896 Estonia was under Russian rule and Tallinn was better known by its old German name of Reval. The German word 'von' was used to denote where a ship was from.

MY FORMATIVE YEARS

My brother's reply arrived a few hours before we sailed. He said no excuses were accepted from men conscripted for military service and by not appearing I would be deemed a deserter, and subject to harsh punishment.

I took his letter and went to see the Russian Consul, a very cultured and principled man. After listening to my story carefully and thinking for a while, he persuasively said, "Leave this for me to sort out. I will make it clear to them that you are tied to charter party contracts which, if carried out carelessly or left unfilled, would cause significant damage to the shipowner whereas deferring your naval training will not damage anyone. Also, it would be pointless for me to remove you from your ship now because the training doesn't start for many months and this time can be used to find someone else to take your place. I'm here to support my country's shipping industry and that's what I'll do. Go on your voyage and don't be concerned with this."

To be entirely at ease, I asked the Consul for a letter saying I had permission to undertake the voyages and he wrote one for me, so I didn't have any worries about this when we sailed out from Norrköping on August 10, 1896.

6 The Mediterranean

Three weeks with a sick crew

After passing Cape Gata the wind turned to the west and weakened, and *Lilly*'s speed declined.

The meridians of Cape Palos, Spain and Point Revellata, on the French island of Corsica, are about 550 miles apart. This distance can easily be covered in three days and nights with a favourable wind but took us nearly three weeks. With only occasional small gusts of wind from almost every direction, usually against us, we were becalmed for most of the next day and night. *Lilly* was frequently motionless for successive watches because there wasn't even the hint of a breeze. The ocean surface was as smooth as glass and covered by a light bluish-grey haze that kept visibility to less than a few miles.

The following days were dead calm from daybreak until midday and then gentle gusts of wind occasionally blew from one direction, then another, before night fell again. We would barely finish trimming the sails only to have the wind die down and, in a little while, start blowing again from a completely different direction. This forced us to re-adjust the sails and continued for day after day. The crew rested in the daytime when we were becalmed, after they had pumped water out from the hold, although I still had to take observations and make calculations, so I didn't have as much time to rest.

Now, new troubles arose. The cook, who had been healthy until then and helped us to tack at night, came down with night blindness. He was no longer available to help and I was increasingly worried that he would start to show signs of scurvy as well, although he managed to avoid this for quite some time.

Then the Austrian got hemorrhoids and could not go up in the rigging anymore.

A near miss

One evening, as we had become used to, gusts of wind blew from different directions, interspersed with brief periods of calm, which required us to keep adjusting the sails. Beginning in the early morning hours, however, there was a steady NNE wind.

We sailed on a port tack in a favourable wind for jibing, which is why I sent the Negro to be stern lookout while I went on the cabin roof and lay down near its edge with a clear view leeward toward *Lilly's* bow. The German had the helm and a clear view windward. It was a dark and cloudy moonless night.

Lying on my stomach and looking ahead, I soon became sleepy and rested my head on my hands. Dozing like this, a ship's red light suddenly appeared in my mind's eye and I instantly recalled the teaching that said, "A red light opposite your green light means a collision hazard, and your ship must yield!" I woke up and as I lifted my head, saw that a red light really was shining lee of our foremast. "Yaw, yaw!" I yelled to the German, who had fallen asleep at the wheel. I jumped down to release the mizzen-sail while the German quickly turned the wheel. In a few more steps I reached the main-sail and released it and then freed the main-braces and the mizzen-staysail halyard. As the ship yawed the Negro, who had also fallen asleep, ran up from the stern, frightened and yelling, "Collision, collision!" A large ballasted brig roared past our bow in full sail on a starboard tack as her crew cursed because *Lilly's* bowsprit had brushed the brig's gaff-sail.

The German tries to kill me

One dark night a strong wind began to blow directly against us. The German had the wheel and the Austrian, Negro, Matti and I went to trim the sails. After dousing both royal sails, Matti ran to stow the fore-royal sail. I ordered the Negro to stow the main-royal sail and he disappeared up in the rigging. After Matti secured the fore-royal sail he climbed down and went to stow the outer jib while the main-royal sail remained unsecured. Wondering what happened to the Negro, I stared up in the darkness and saw him frozen on the main shroud. I had looked there earlier but not

caught sight of him because he was a coloured man. Despite my curt command to climb up and stow the sail, he said his will to do this was gone. I grabbed the first rope that came to hand and tried to sting him into action with the end of it, but it barely reached him. In doing so, my wooden shoes slipped on the dew-covered deck and I fell on my back just as I heard a loud crack beside my head and felt a heavy piece of logwood brush against my left shoulder. I quickly jumped to my feet and saw someone disappear in the darkness behind the corner of the cabin. At the same time, the sails began to flap as *Lilly* had turned into the wind. In a few quick steps I reached the helm and saw the German turning the wheel so the wind could begin filling the sails.

It seemed clear that the German had tried to strike me, though unsuccessfully. Hearing me rant at the Negro, he must have snuck up behind me with a piece of logwood that he had hidden earlier so it would be close at hand. Had I remained upright, his blow might have killed me. Because I had slipped on the deck in the dark, his blow missed my head, though not by very much. I didn't say anything to the German and only paced back and forth in front of him a few times, holding the same piece of wood in my hand, while he held the wheel. When I'd stung the Negro with the rope-end it sparked some life into him and soon he had the main-royal sail stowed. At daybreak the wind died down again, and we barely moved the entire day.

After the day began, I summoned the German to the place where he had tried to kill me the previous night and showed him the fresh gash in the deck plank, which was one-inch deep and three inches wide. Then I took the revolver from my pocket and said that now it was my turn. I said that I wouldn't harm him yet but would keep a close eye on him and that my revolver was always close at hand.

I did not know what the man's background was, but it had undoubtedly been a dark one. He told the Austrian that he'd run away from a German naval ship and would never set foot in Germany again, but I thought he had run away from a sentence of forced labour of some kind.

Only 3 healthy crewmen

The poor sailmaker had been bedridden for five weeks already while the other invalids – Peter, Karl and Andrew – had been laid up for somewhat less, and the boatswain had been unable to function for less than three weeks. The men suffered greatly because their gums were decaying and loosening their teeth while their shins and forearms had become deformed and were covered in purple blotches. The smallest movement caused them great pain. In addition to Peter, some of the others also developed black-edged ulcers on their legs. They had not received any salted meat since coming down with scurvy and were given canned meat and fish instead, as long as we continued to have some. To the extent *Lilly's* medicine chest held products to help them we used whatever treatment the physician's handbook recommended for symptoms of scurvy until these were all used up.

After we ran out of canned food and then wine, which I'd carefully been rationing among all the crewmen, sick or healthy, we ate cakes made of groats, rice, beans and peas that had been mashed up and fried in peanut oil or boiled in syrup. For drinking water, we used tea that had cooled down.

Of the Estonians, only the cook and myself remained untouched by scurvy although the cook had come down with night blindness, an indicator of scurvy, a few days before.

The Austrian boy was bothered by painful hemorrhoids and we rubbed petroleum jelly on them to reduce his discomfort. He could help with pumping the hold and by taking the wheel but not with handling the sails.

The Negro now had some difficulty because the work aboard *Lilly* was more taxing than he'd bargained for and the Mediterranean climate – he had never been outside of the Caribbean before – affected him so badly that his muscles cramped up. Because of this, he also could not go up in the rigging anymore.

Only the Finn, the German and myself remained healthy and navigation of the ship fell to the three of us although I had to be very careful with the German, who I considered to be a criminal. Aside from the regular work of keeping *Lilly* on the correct course, pumping water from the hold and

tending to the invalids, the sails frequently had to be trimmed. I fashioned a small, handheld pulley-block with which I was able to tension the halyards, sheets and braces.

I have often wondered why none of my crew, who suffered so long and so much, died from scurvy. After getting to a hospital their health improved quite quickly.

Providing refuge for two whales

Around midday one Saturday a couple of whales appeared near *Lilly* and swam around the ship. When the wind picked up that evening and we began to move ahead, the whales swam beside us, one on each side of the ship. Sometimes they came very close to *Lilly*'s hull and, when doing so, Matti and I estimated their length to be about 92 feet. They kept especially close to the ship during the night, so close that water from their blowholes frequently fell on *Lilly*'s deck when they exhaled. Sometimes we saw their flukes come down so hard on the water surface near the ship that I worried *Lilly*'s rudder would be damaged. After daybreak the following morning, when it still seemed they might damage the rudder with their flukes, I put a lead slug into the shotgun and fired at the portside whale when its back was above the water. The slug entered the whale's back like it was a tub of grease and the creature ignored it. They occasionally swam around *Lilly* in a large circle during the day and then returned close to the ship at night, when each of them remained on one side of the ship.

This continued day and night for a week until midday the following Saturday, when they swam far away from *Lilly* for the first time. They went about a mile to the north and then suddenly started to swim around in circles and chase each other as if they were playing.

And yet, dark patches soon appeared on the quiet, peaceful water surface and slowly spread out, turning red in colour. After this, the whales began to jump high out of the water, in turn, and then raced directly to the south. They passed barely a quarter mile away from *Lilly*, jumping out of the water so energetically that their entire bodies were briefly a few yards above the water surface. We heard loud cracks when they fell back into the water, as if cannons had been fired, and the water around them turned into a

vortex of white foam. The whales kept racing southward and disappeared into the haze that covered the horizon.

The whales had apparently sought shelter near *Lilly* for a week after encountering a large sawfish. Believing they had evaded the creature, they swam further away from the ship only to find the sawfish had just been lying in wait for them, and then attacked. I didn't see anything other than large pools of blood on the water surface, but the blood and the whales' desperate breaching were ample evidence of a sawfish attack.

Seeing these behemoths of the ocean breach as they swam past *Lilly* was simply amazing.

We borrow some food

One afternoon, more than two weeks after we passed Gibraltar, a gust of wind from the northwest allowed us to get back on the right heading again. The wind also cleared the opaque haze that had covered the water surface since we were becalmed, and we saw a ship coming toward us, sailing closer to the wind, that quickly approached.

This was the second ship we had seen since Gibraltar. As it got closer we saw it was a small brigantine on a course parallel to ours. I raised our national flag and also signal flags requesting some fresh food. In reply, the brigantine raised the French flag. When the other ship was about half a mile away she started to back her sails and we did the same. We had already started to lower *Lilly*'s large and only boat from the beam to the deck as soon as we caught sight of the other ship. This had been wise, as now it would not take us very long to lower the boat over the rail.

After giving the cook a letter I had written some time ago in French, with the help of a seafaring handbook, just in case, the cook and Matti got into the boat. In the letter, I advised that most of my crew had come down with scurvy and asked them to loan us some food such as potatoes, onions, fruit and wine.

After the boat pulled away from *Lilly* we were downwind from it and I heard Matti ask the cook if he spoke any French. When the cook said no, Matti started to swear, wondering what they were going to do. He told the cook that he didn't know any French either and the men on the brigantine

were unlikely to speak other languages. Only then did the cook take my letter from his pocket and show it to Matti, saying, "This letter is written in French, explains our situation and asks for everything we need." Matti marveled at this and asked if the captain spoke any French. While continuing to row, the cook explained to Matti that I had books in many languages and, by studying them, could write letters in different languages. After their discussion was over the two men fell quiet and used all their energy to row, because it was difficult to row the large boat with only two men in it.

I watched with the binoculars as they reached the other ship and after a while some items were passed down to the boat. Then the boat began to row back and the brigantine resumed sailing, dipping its flag three times in farewell. I replied in a similar fashion and used our signal flags to thank for their help.

As the boat pulled beside *Lilly*, both Matti and the cook called "hurray!" three times and then Matti took in the oars and held up a bucket filled with wine and called "hurray!" three more times.

After climbing up to the deck, the cook gave me a letter from the brigantine's captain. He also handed me three cigars the captain had wrapped in paper for me. In the bottom of the boat were a bag of potatoes, half a bag of onions (all the onions the captain had in reserve), two buckets of wine and some lemons. The captain's letter said he had given us everything he could spare and regretted not being able to provide more. He sent me his last cigars and had kept only a liter of wine for each of his men. The ship was from Bastia on the French island of Corsica. I gave each of the men, sick or healthy, a mug filled with wine and took the rest, along with everything else, to the cabin for safekeeping and rationing.

I gave lemons to the sick men and forced them to eat raw potatoes and onions. This caused them a lot of pain due to their decaying gums and loose teeth. The wine noticeably reduced their suffering. I even forced the cook to eat raw potatoes and onions and gave him more wine than the others. He managed to remain mobile until our voyage ended.

A French Admiral's help

Three weeks after sailing past Gibraltar, we found ourselves about 50 miles west of Cape Revellata on Corsica's northwest coast. The weather was unchanged. One morning between 9 and 10 a.m. we started to see clouds of dark smoke on the western and northwestern horizons which seemed to be approaching one another. The smoke came from naval ships and the smokestacks of both squadrons spewed a lot of smoke in the air. As they approached we saw flashes of light in the lower layers of smoke and soon heard the thunder of cannons.

Both squadrons were on a bearing parallel to ours and kept getting closer as they continued to fire their cannons. Using the binoculars, I could soon identify the types of ships and also see small torpedo boats zig-zagging around both fleets, leaving dark puffs of smoke behind.

What I saw puzzled me – was this an actual battle or were these naval maneuvers?

When the fleets got quite close to one another the cannon fire intensified and thunder shook the air. Suddenly the western fleet turned around and sailed west at high speed and the northwestern fleet headed in our direction. A warship flying an admiral's flag was in the lead, surrounded by many cruisers and countless torpedo boats, all bearing French flags. I quickly ordered our national flag raised and also some signal flags to greet them with. About a minute after our flags were up, the Admiral's ship hoisted flags that thanked us for the greeting and wished us a pleasant voyage. I had previously prepared some signal flags asking for medical assistance and now ordered these to be raised. The flagship soon replied, signaling, "Help is on its way!" In a little while we saw a boat leave the flagship and row toward the nearest torpedo boat while the rest of the fleet came to a standstill.

The torpedo boat soon approached *Lilly* and launched a small sailcloth raft that was rowed by two sailors. It also held a lieutenant and two naval doctors. Now a problem arose because neither of the doctors spoke any language other than French, which I did not understand. Between them the three French naval officers managed a few words of English and I fetched a dictionary to help. Soon we were able to communicate as I managed to

understand their questions and was able to reply. I took them to the fo'c's'le to see the sick crewmen. They thoroughly examined all the men and then spoke with the lieutenant that brought them, while shaking their heads. The doctors then examined the cook, Matti, the Austrian, the Negro and finally the German, who was frightened and had tried to keep his distance. I was the last one they looked at. They had me undress in the cabin and examined me thoroughly, including my eyes.

Then they summarized their findings. The older doctor started to speak, and the others helped as much as they could with their limited English and some of my dictionaries. The summary was pretty much as follows: no one aboard the ship was healthy and aside from the men that had scurvy, the others were also sick and exhausted.

"But I'm healthy!" I said. When they finally understood what I had said, all three of them started to laugh. The older doctor quickly turned serious again and said, "You're so sick you could collapse any time, most likely when your willpower weakens."

Then the lieutenant said, "Please lower your sails and wait here until I've spoken with the Admiral."

The three men then disembarked from *Lilly* and returned to the flagship.

We had barely finished dousing the sails when the cruiser, *Milan*, approached *Lilly* and lowered her boat, bringing two officers and many sailors aboard our ship.⁵⁹ As soon as they stepped on deck the sailors were ordered up in the rigging to stow our sails. One of the officers remained aboard *Lilly* and the other returned to the cruiser. A little while later the boat came back to *Lilly* with a thick, manila tow rope. The end of this was tied to *Lilly*'s capstan so poorly that untying it would be impossible once it was pulled taut.

I learned from the officer that remained aboard *Lilly* that the Admiral ordered us towed to the nearest port with quarantine facilities. This was Ajaccio, on Corsica's western coast about 80 miles south of our position. *Milan* would tow us there.

⁵⁹ The brigantine *Milan*, launched 1884, was a steel-hulled, 1,705-ton, unarmoured, Villars Class cruiser with length 302.2 ft., breadth 32.8 ft., draft 15.6 ft. and a complement of 194 men. See navypedia.org/ships/france/fr_cr_milan.htm

Immediately after giving the cruiser this order, the Admiral sailed southwest along with the rest of his fleet and the entire horizon became obscured by dark smoke. They were going to continue the training exercise that their mock naval battle had been part of.

As soon as the tow rope was fastened, two French sailors came to *Lilly*'s helm and the cruiser started off at full speed. This resulted in *Lilly* being suddenly pulled ahead with such force that I thought she had been torn in half. We were towed toward the south at a speed of 11 knots and reached the coast near Ajaccio after it was already dark. The cruiser ordered the tow rope released and for us to drop anchor. When the French sailors realized they could not untie their knot, they grabbed the axe I had earlier placed nearby and cut the rope with it. The rope was a new one, more than 20 inches in circumference and about 7 inches in diameter.

The Russian Consul came aboard *Lilly* soon after we dropped anchor in Ajaccio. He was a local merchant and did not speak any languages other than French and Italian but had brought comprehensive French-German and German-French dictionaries along and used them so skillfully that we were able to understand one another. The Consul also brought along a doctor, a nurse, a basket of fruit, a small jug of wine and a basket filled with clean clothes. Assisted by the healthier men, all of the crewmen took baths, got dressed in clean clothes and were given some fruit to eat and wine to drink. This made them so happy that tears gleamed in their eyes.

When all this had been taken care of, the Consul said a boat would come out to *Lilly* at daybreak and take everyone to the hospital. I said that I would not be joining the others as I didn't want to leave the ship in the hands of strangers, and he finally relented. As the doctor had already examined me, the Consul promised to bring me some medicines.

The boat arrived the next morning and I helped carry the invalids from the fo'c's'le to the boat. The sailmaker had wasted away so much that I gathered him into my arms as if he were a child. The boat had brought some fruit, wine and various medicines for me. A while later, some fishermen came to the ship and pumped out the hold. With their help, I removed the cut-off end of the cruiser's tow rope and placed it inside their boat. Then they rowed me out to the cruiser, which was anchored nearby.

A guard was stationed at the stairs leading up to the cruiser's deck and he directed me to the ship's commander, who received me very graciously. He congratulated me, in English, for saving my crew from a very difficult situation.

I thanked him warmly and also asked him to thank the Admiral on my behalf, which he promised to do. I said that I'd brought back the cut-off end of their tow rope and asked him to send an invoice to the Consul listing the cost of all the help they had given us, and the Consul would reimburse them. This made the commander laugh and he said that I did not owe them a penny and could keep the rope-end as a souvenir. He added that they, the French, were pleased to help citizens of a nation they were on good terms with.

The Consul came back to the ship that evening with a doctor and a man assigned to be *Lilly's* watchman. The Consul said he would stay aboard until he could convince me that I needed to visit the hospital as well, so I agreed to go. The hospital was on the bay shore, surrounded by grape vines, and I was given a single room that was clean, quiet and peaceful.

Corsican warmth

For three days I rested peacefully while eating fruit and sipping red wine. Then I checked out of the hospital. I hired a boat to row me out to *Lilly* so I could check up on the ship and her watchman. The boat then brought me back to Ajaccio's pier and I planned to visit the Consul to discuss when we could resume our voyage.

A fisherman gave me directions to the Consul's office. On my way there, people who saw me walking in the street politely stopped to say hello and tried to engage me in conversation. When the Consul later took me to a café everyone got to their feet and cheered as we stepped inside. They crowded around us shaking my hand, asking lots of questions and expressing endless sympathy for our plight. Apparently, newspapers had written a story about our suffering. The people thought I was Russian and expressed warm friendship toward me because the French President was in

St. Petersburg at the time and various celebrations of friendship were taking place there between the two nations.⁶⁰

Afterward the Consul took me to see the house that Napoleon Bonaparte was born in and showed me other important places in Ajaccio. Then we went to visit my crewmen. On our way to the hospital, located on the far side of the bay, people who lived in the mountains came toward us riding donkeys and wearing colourful native clothes. Some women rode side-saddle while others sat astride their donkeys just like men. The Consul explained that after women were married they rode like men, but unmarried women rode side-saddle.

Doctors at the hospital said the cook, German, Austrian, Negro and Matti were well enough to be released and could return to *Lilly*. When we arrived back at the ship all of them except the cook asked to be paid off. I agreed to this and borrowed money from the Consul to pay them with. Most men left the ship right after they were paid but the German remained until evening. By the time he left the ship at dusk, he had painted his feet black and wore an old shirt and pants he had borrowed from the Austrian, who was almost the same size. When the cook saw what the German was doing and asked why he was painting his feet, the German said it helped to make them harder to see at night.

Because the men still in hospital had to remain there for a while longer, I decided to hire some local men to help sail *Lilly* to Genoa. With the Consul's help, I hired nine Corsican fishermen. They arrived at the ship early the next morning carrying baskets filled with fruit, fish and many bottles of absinthe. This is a strong alcoholic drink made with wormwood, anise and other aromatic plants. It is much more potent than other strong liquors and drinking it can cause hallucinations and serious disorders of the nervous system. Absinthe is usually mixed with water, turning the liquor white in colour. The fishermen were drunk when they came aboard *Lilly*, they were drunk during the voyage and they were drunk when they left the ship in Genoa. They did not understand a word if it wasn't in their Corsican dialect of French nor had they ever sailed on a ship of any size. I had to

⁶⁰ In August 1897, French President, Felix Faure (1841-1899) visited St. Petersburg, Russia for the first high-level French diplomatic visit since Emperor Nicholas II took the Russian Throne in 1894. During the Franco-Russian Alliance (1892-1917) the two countries had economic and military ties and common foreign policy.

show them what to do and the cook, the only man from the previous crew still aboard, helped me with the most important work.

It took considerable time and effort to weigh anchor and then we raised the sails and left the friendly town of Ajaccio behind. Everything was fine aboard *Lilly* as long as the wind was favourable, as the fishermen were able to hold the wheel on course, more or less. When the wind picked up, however, and we had to take in the royal sails, none of them wanted to climb up and do this. After I angrily ordered them to work, to do what they had been hired for, four men climbed up onto each royal-yard to stow the small royal sails. This work is usually assigned to a boy and looking up in the rigging I became afraid they might fall down, along with the yards, but fortunately the yards held.

We were also fortunate that the weather remained lovely and the wind favourable, so we didn't have to tack, not even once. The fishermen drank, sang, loitered around on deck and ignored me when I ordered them to pump out the hold. So, the cook and I had to do this strenuous work on our own again. We had already been doing it for many weeks before reaching Ajaccio. After arriving in Genoa, one of the first things I planned to do was have a wind pump installed aboard *Lilly*.

This strange voyage, with a crew we couldn't talk to and that were perpetually drunk, took three and a half days. When we finally reached Genoa, we dropped two anchors from *Lilly*'s bow into a few dozen fathoms of water and fastened chains from her stern to the pier. Then the Corsicans jumped off the ship without saying goodbye and disappeared among the warehouses, leaving their empty baskets and bottles behind. Now only two of us remained aboard *Lilly*, although even the cook was not planning to stay much longer and I would soon be on my own.

An agent dislikes Germans

Mr. Meyer, *Lilly*'s owner, had chosen a German shipbroker, Johann Brunken, to be the ship's agent in Genoa. My initial request of Brunken was that he determine the local cost of all provisions supplied to us at sea by the French brigantine *Milan*, whose home port was on Corsica. I asked

him to send a cheque in this amount to *Milan's* agent in Bastia right away, along with my thanks.

A few days later, the Consul received a letter addressed to me, in French, from *Milan's* agent, returning the cheque that Brunken had sent him. I asked the Consul to read me the letter, but he couldn't bother to do this and did not even ask his secretary to do so. Instead, he referred me to Brunken, saying I had an agent to deal with these things. I suspected the letter said some unfavourable things about Brunken but as there was nothing I could do about this, I decided to go and visit him. He visibly stiffened as soon as he started reading the letter and when he finished he threw it on the floor. Then he paced back and forth across the room with an angry, red face. It took a long time before he was able to answer my question about what the letter said.

Milan's agent was apparently very angry with the German and Brunken didn't want to translate the letter for me. His emotions weren't calm enough to translate the letter for me until the following day. The Corsican agent said he was unhappy that I had ended up in the crooked claws of a German, saying there were no bigger crooks in the world and advising me to immediately find another agent for *Lilly*. He also thanked me for the cheque but was returning it with his letter because no payment was necessary for help given freely between people of friendly nations, similar to what occurred naturally between seamen, who were ready to help other ships in distress without any thought of being paid for doing so.

Brunken, an old merchant, was now entirely calm and, at my request, drafted a polite, warm and thankful letter to the Corsican and then asked his assistant to prepare a clean copy. This was sent after I signed it and that was the end of the matter.

Flying insects

It was taking a long time for the stevedore's men to discharge *Lilly's* cargo. As there was no cargo on deck that needed to be unloaded, an official weighman, authorized by the city of Genoa, had set up on the ship's deck and weighed all the cargo that was being unloaded from the hold, so I had no worries about being cheated.

The small, white worms that fell out from our hardtack when we tapped them against the table before putting them in our mouths had now turned into dark-coloured, flying insects, similar to fleas, and thousands of them flew around inside the cabins and rooms and everywhere else.

Despite carefully cleaning everything, we still found plenty of the bugs on our clothes when we went to town. Every time I sat down in the streetcar, people were polite and always made room for me, likely due to the small black insects they saw crawling on my clothes. The insects didn't seem to trust their wings to fly when they were away from the ship.

I spoke to Brunken about them and we decided to sell our remaining inventory of biscuits as animal food and then have the ship thoroughly cleaned. This is how we finally got rid of these companions, being unaware that more fearsome creatures would arrive shortly to take their place.

Organized crime

Soon after we arrived in Genoa the cook asked me to send money to his mother back home and for cash to buy himself new clothes. I did this quite happily considering his good service. All his earnings on the voyage had now been paid. Then suddenly I found no trace of him aboard *Lilly* one morning. I didn't see him again until many years later in Tallinn when he looked me up. The cook said he had been hired in Genoa by a steamship line as cook's helper on the firm's Genoa to New York route and had left immediately.

Now that I was entirely alone aboard the ship I went to visit Brunken and asked him to find me a new crew.

Within a few days he sent me three men, two Austrians, the oldest of whom was a mate, and a young Italian. The mate didn't have a diploma to show me but had a certificate from the Austrian Consul attesting that he held a ship officer's diploma. This was lost when *Anna*, the brigantine he used to work on, had sunk. The other Austrian showed me many references from ships he had worked aboard as a sailor. The Italian youth similarly showed me a reference saying he had worked as an apprentice seaman. Everything seemed to be in order with the three men. We were able to communicate because even the Italian lad knew a little German. I hired all

three of them. The Italian began to work as the cook, under the mate's supervision, as it seemed the mate was very familiar with a cook's duties.

The Italian didn't have many clothes and what little he possessed were in poor shape. I befriended him and gave him a few pieces of my own clothing, things he needed the most. This resulted in my being taken into his confidence not long afterward. When he came into the mess to clear the table after lunch one day, the boy lingered nearby and then, after a quick glance toward the deck, he half-whispered in my ear, in his poor German, "Captain, you have been very good to me . . . I feel sorry for you . . . watch out for the mate!" Having barely been able to say these words, he suddenly stopped himself, turned sheet white and quickly finished clearing the table. As this took place I heard some quiet steps on the cabin roof. I stepped over the threshold from the mess into the cabin and saw that the skylight was open. Looking up, I saw the mate's legs as he stood there listening. I went out on deck right away and quickly glanced at the cabin roof. By that time the mate was already beside the mizzenmast, starting to apply paint to its collar. I didn't know when he had crept onto the cabin roof as I had not heard him and apparently neither had the boy. These events got me thinking that something wasn't quite right. I quickly changed clothes and went to visit Brunken in town, telling him what I had seen and heard. He was very surprised and then grabbed his cane (he had a heavy limp) and said, "Let's go to the ship!"

Deep in our own thoughts, neither of us spoke on the way to *Lilly*. When we reached the ship I quickly stepped over the transom onto the deck and Brunken followed behind. We saw that work had finished for the day, the hatches were closed, and everything was quiet. I was shocked to see drops of blood on deck and as I went toward the galley I also saw some large bloodstains.

The door to the galley was open and there was a pool of blood on the floor inside. No one was there so I went to the fo'c's'le. The old clothes that belonged to the Austrian sailor and the Italian boy were gone. I hurried to the mate's room and found no trace of him or his belongings. By now Brunken had reached the middle of the deck and, as I returned, I saw his surprise at seeing the bloody footsteps. He asked to see the papers the men

had brought aboard the ship with them. I fetched these from the cabin cupboard and gave them to Brunken, who studied them carefully for a few moments and then said, "Let's visit the Austrian Consul!"

We learned from the Austrian Consul that the mate's document, including the stamp and the Consul's signature, were forged. Brunken called the police and was told they would start an investigation. The police soon determined that the Camorra had been involved. Their men had found a way to get aboard *Lilly* and hoped to steal her freight fee after it had been paid to me.⁶¹ The criminals apparently knew little about merchant shipping because, if they had, they would've known that captains rarely carried more money aboard their ships than might be needed to pay the wages of departing crewmen. The police also learned that a wounded man had been seen in the harbour but didn't know where the man went or what might have happened afterward.

It certainly seemed like the man who was impersonating a mate thought the cook had said something to me, and because of this began to question the boy and likely ended up stabbing him. Whether the 'Austrians' were actually from Austria was questionable because, judging by the Italian they spoke, the stevedores believed both of them to be Italians.

To my great consolation, the boatswain soon arrived back at *Lilly*. He was the first of the remaining crewmen to be released from hospital in Ajaccio. I soon found a Negro cook in Genoa, a nice, tall, clean and polite man from Barbados that was knowledgeable about his trade. Eventually, the rest of the sick crewmen, except the sailmaker, were released from hospital as well and made their way back to the ship while we were still in Genoa. The sailmaker finally caught up to us in Sicily.

Viking blood

With more than 600,000 residents, Genoa is one of the largest cities in Italy. It also has the finest harbour in the Mediterranean. The city is a commercial and industrial center with large fruit packing operations, silk textile factories, metal works, shipyards and other businesses. Genoa was

⁶¹ *The Camorra is a criminal syndicate dating to 16th century Naples that thrived on extortion, blackmail and violence.

already an important town in the 17th century, famous for making gold and silver braid, and has been one of the Mediterranean's most important ports since the mid 15th century. Christopher Columbus, who discovered America, was born in Genoa. Italy's founder and national hero, Giuseppe Garibaldi, participated in his first attempted uprising here to free Italians from external dominance. This took place one dark February night in 1834. While the attempted insurrection was a dismal failure, Garibaldi escaped by crawling through yards and scaling rock walls.⁶²

The city of Genoa is situated on a wide, semi-circular bay beneath a tiered and rocky hillside decorated by vibrant gardens and streets lined with beautiful shrubs and trees.

In the old part of town, where streets were narrow and crooked, ancient multi-storey stone buildings were being demolished to build the straight, wide thoroughfares required for a network of streetcars.

There were about 15,000 Germans living in Genoa at the time and they had their own clubhouse on one of the slope's highest levels. The property included a spacious garden, a vineyard and even a marble bowling alley. Every Thursday the club had a wagon of beer delivered there and the prosperous German community came together to socialize, bowl and drink frothy mugs of beer.

Already on the first Thursday after *Lilly* arrived in Genoa, Brunken invited me to the club.

The bowling and beer drinking were well underway when we arrived, and everyone was in a good mood. Brunken introduced me to the club's directors, men with academic degrees that were heads of banks and factories. I soon learned that they had heard of me, and of *Lilly*'s difficult voyage, from reading the newspapers and soon more people gathered around. I was questioned in great detail about many things. Club members that were doctors were very interested to hear about scurvy, an uncommon disease by then, and were sorry that my sick men had to be left behind in Ajaccio. Two men with doctorates in biology asked if they could collect

⁶² Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882) worked to unify and democratize Italy and liberate it from Austrian and French dominance. In February 1834, an insurrection involving Garibaldi failed and though he escaped, he was sentenced to death in absentia. Italy was finally unified in 1861 but did not become a democracy until 1946.

scorpions, tarantulas and insects from *Lilly*. After giving them permission to do so, they visited the ship's hold every day while cargo was being discharged and were apparently pleased with the specimens they collected.

The club's president was a tall, slim middle-aged man with a black beard. He was also the head of a factory. Ignoring my reluctance and protests that I had never even held a bowling ball in my hand, the president soon led me away from a group of businessmen by recruiting me to his bowling team. When it was my turn to bowl and I stood up to fetch a ball, my recruiter and team captain whispered, "Take the smallest one!" I did as he suggested and rolled the ball as hard as I could. It went whirring at high speed toward the other end of the white marble track where the bowling pins were standing. All of a sudden there was a noisy clatter and then the president and my other teammates gave a loud cheer because all nine pins were lying down. My ball had run into them with such momentum that they'd knocked each other down. This won the game for us and in the excitement that followed, everyone grabbed a frothy glass mug filled with beer and gathered around to congratulate me. The president reached over the other team members with his mug so he could clink it against mine, and loudly yelled, "This is Viking blood!"

After the mugs were empty the president took my arm and lead me to the garden for a stroll among the grapevines, where a view over the entire Gulf of Genoa opened up. Looking down on the harbour it seemed like all the ships and warehouses could fit in the palm of one hand. Most of the people were now out enjoying the garden. Talking with one another and drinking from their mugs from time to time, everyone gazed down at the lovely and interesting panorama. One of the people there was the German captain of a steamship on the Genoa to New York line. My guide, the president, stopped near this captain and clapped his hands to draw everyone's attention to himself. Then he called out, "Gentlemen! Look down at the harbour! You will see a Genoa to New York line steamship that is white and has two yellow smokestacks. The captain of this wonderful steamship, a man who we all know, is here among you. When his voyages get underway he doesn't have to do much more than step onto the command bridge and issue commands to the engine room. Then steam

power takes this floating hotel across the ocean and its navigation only requires choosing the most direct route. In doing so, the ship is equipped with the most recent and best equipment and instruments and has many navigation officers.

Now look at the other side of the pier! There you see a three-masted sailing ship that recently arrived from Mexico with a cargo of dyewood. In addition to her sails, the ship's three masts and ten yards act as her engines and wind is what powers her. And here is the ship's captain," he called, pointing toward me. Despite my protests he continued, "Through every kind of weather, headwinds and storms, this man has safely delivered his ship's cargo to Genoa from the Yucatan coast, being forced to sail for weeks on end with only 2 or 3 sailors to help maneuver the ship and having to navigate on his own without any help – Look, this is a real seaman! This is Viking blood! Long live the romance of sailing ships!"

Frothy mugs of beer were raised again and downed in long gulps. After this, the captain of the steamship slowly and quietly left the group. I was embarrassed and would have been happy to leave as well but the team that recruited me, with its philosopher-captain, called me to bowl some more. I was very reluctant, as my initial success was due to chance and not any skill on my part.

This proved itself during the next game when I was only able to knock down one or two of the pins despite trying my best. Luckily everyone played poorly, perhaps affected by the beer, and my poor performance didn't stand out within the team. At the first opportunity I slipped away unnoticed, as my maritime colleague had. On subsequent Thursdays, I did not visit the club again despite being invited by Brunken.

This was the only time I have ever visited a German club and I didn't see another bowling alley again for a very long time. Years later in Cardiff, I happened to participate in a bowling match and the third time was many years after that, in Tallinn. On both of these occasions I managed to knock all the pins down on my first roll and my subsequent throws in both cities were very poor, no matter how hard I tried.

***Lilly* gets Finnish papers**

Before unloading of *Lilly*'s cargo had finished, I received a letter from Mr. Meyer containing a purchase and sale agreement for the ship. He wrote that he had sold *Lilly* to a Finnish man, a native of Vyborg but a resident of Tallinn. This was a sale of convenience because when a Russian flagged vessel arrived in a Russian port, the shipowner had to pay a significant customs tariff. Finnish flagged ships, however, were exempt from this. So, we had to paint *Lilly von Vyborg* over top of *Lilly von Reval* on the ship's stern and both sides of her bow and then visit the Russian Consul to have new registration documents prepared for her.⁶³

Meyer's letter also held a new general power of attorney that gave me the authority to make whatever decisions I thought were in *Lilly*'s best interest, in the owner's name, even if this was to sell her. The document placed a great deal of trust in me and also heightened my sense of duty, my responsibility and my worries because Mr. Meyer stressed that I should make all decisions about the ship as if she belonged to me. The Finnish man only owned the ship on a piece of paper and had nothing to do with her operation. Meyer himself had a new business to run and this left him no time to think about the ship. He had recently started a large leather goods factory in St. Petersburg.

In order to change the ship's registration, however, the Russian Consul said I had to sail to Finland and have this taken care of there. The temporary registration he issued was not valid for a long enough time for me to do anything other than sail to Finland before it expired.

As a result, I needed to find some cargo destined for Finland. Fortunately, I was able to find salt that needed to be shipped from the port of Trapani, on the island of Sicily, to Vyborg.

After the Camorra incident, I had sent a telegram to Mr. Meyer asking him to find a mate back home and send him here. *Lilly*'s cargo had already been discharged and we had started to load ballast in her hold but there was still no news about a mate being found for the ship.

⁶³ Vyborg, located 80 miles NW of St. Petersburg, was part of the Grand Duchy of Finland at the time, and previously belonged to the medieval Kingdom of Sweden. It fell to the Red Army in 1944.

In quick succession, Karl, Andrew and Peter were released from hospital in Ajaccio and returned to join the boatswain aboard *Lilly*. I found two Italians in Genoa to join the crew, one an able seaman, a fully qualified sailor, and the other an apprentice. I also hired a Spaniard and Portuguese, both of them able seamen.

With this crew of eight – again without a mate – we started our voyage to Trapani.

A Stradivarius

After collecting the contractual shipping fee for delivering logwood to Genoa, including the demurrage owed from the Yucatan, outfitting *Lilly* with food and other supplies and finishing the loading of ballast, I returned to the Consul's office. I needed to have the new men added to the muster roll and collect documents necessary for *Lilly* to get clearance to leave port.

After leaving the Consul's office I passed a shop that sold musical instruments and some beautiful violins in the window caught my attention. With fond memories of being in a violin ensemble during my youth, I stopped to take a look at them. It seemed strange that I had distanced myself from playing the violin. I also remembered how, as a country boy, I had decided to do without my violin. After a long and unsuccessful search for shipboard work in Tallinn, I decided to visit St. Petersburg and try my luck there. To raise money for the journey I pawned my violin to an old family friend. Years later when I went to redeem my pledge, I learned the violin had been sold long ago.

And now here I was, standing in the land of fabulous violin masters. It would be embarrassing, I thought to myself, to leave here without buying a violin! I stepped inside the music shop where, as a stranger, I was greeted in German. I asked to be shown a decent but inexpensive violin.

The shopkeeper placed several violins on the counter. He especially recommended one of them and drew my attention to the label seen inside. Stuck inside the violin was a very old and yellowed strip of paper on which 'Francesco Stradivarius Anno 1740' was typewritten. I expected this violin to cost thousands and could scarcely believe my ears when he asked only 100 Lira for it. I didn't reply but suddenly noticed the shopkeeper placing

the violin inside a case and wrapping it up in paper, telling me the amount owing was 80 Lira. I readily agreed and placed this amount of cash on the counter. After returning to *Lilly* my joyful mood burst when I noticed a 'Made in Germany' label stuck to the bottom of the violin case. I gave a start when I saw this but soon comforted myself by thinking that the case might have been made in Germany but such a weathered violin with a yellow label bearing the name of a master couldn't possibly have been made in Germany.

I was just contemplating these thoughts and beginning to tune the instrument when someone came on board – one of the Italian biologists that was collecting scorpions, tarantulas and insects from *Lilly's* hold. He heard the violin being tuned and stepped inside the cabin to ask if I had purchased myself a new one. I said it wasn't a new violin but quite an old one and showed him the label inside of it. The man of knowledge peered at the label and then started to laugh, saying, "A complete fake! Instruments made by old masters have never been sold on music shop shelves. Italians don't make forgeries of Stradivariuses, but Germans do." So, the violin and its case were both 'Made in Germany' and their value, in my eyes, fell to zero, particularly as the violin was a forgery and object of deception. I believed that a violinist had to like the instrument they played. Because I didn't like the forgery I had purchased, I never resumed playing. I left the violin at home and the next time I returned from a long voyage, I found that my children had removed the top sheet from the 'Stradivarius' to make room for one of their dolls to sleep in it. This didn't bother me at all. But the golden memories from my boyhood of playing the violin have yet to be extinguished

Leaving Genoa

After paying all the necessary fees, settling the ship's bills and sending her surplus funds to Meyer, I obtained clearance for *Lilly* to leave port. Then I said goodbye to Brunken and some other people we had come to know there. Because it was calm, I had a tug tow the ship to the outer harbour and we dropped anchor there, waiting for the wind to pick up before we set out.

Sitting on *Lilly's* deck, breathing in fresh sea air while studying the city of Genoa, her harbour and the panorama of her beautiful surroundings, I felt elated. Excitement grew inside of me as can only be felt by a sailing ship captain about to leave a large city behind, with all its troubles and worries, and escape into his own element, just like a fish that escapes from a muddy slough into clear waters.

After organizing the crew into watches and making all preparations for us to sail, I gave everyone some free time to get their belongings in order before we sailed out.

A veritable babel of tongues had come aboard *Lilly* and some men could not understand a word spoken by others. The 9-man crew brought five nationalities and languages together aboard the ship. The new apprentice, the 18-year old son of an Italian military officer, didn't start preparing for the voyage like the others by cleaning and organizing his bunk and sorting personal items into boxes and bags. Instead, he blithely took his guitar from its black cloth bag and readily started to play it with his thin, white fingers. All the other crewmen stopped what they were doing and gathered around the boy. The language spoken by his skilled fingers as they played the strings of the guitar was understood by everyone. Soon a warm feeling of camaraderie overcame the mottled crewmen from five countries gathered on *Lilly's* freshly scrubbed deck beneath three masts and ten yards, in the rays of the setting sun, as the ship slowly undulated with swells that were moving below the glassy water surface. The swells indicated that a wind was approaching.

The crew stood in a semi-circle around the apprentice, who was sitting on the edge of an open hatch, enthusiastically continuing his evening concert in front of an attentive and responsive audience. It was an interesting collection of listeners. Along with four broad-shouldered, thick-waisted, relatively slow-moving Estonians stood a slim Italian of average height with inherently lively movements and a Spaniard and Portuguese who were both thin and rather small. Leaning against the galley wall, away from the others, with his shiny, pitch-black skin and curly black hair similar to sheep's wool, was the cook. He stood about a head taller than the other men and was wearing a blue apron and white shirt with the sleeves rolled

up. From the moment the apprentice appeared aboard *Lilly*, lugging his large guitar case, the Negro cook's tendency had been to playfully mock and tease the lad but now the smirk was gone from his face, replaced by a solemn look that appreciated the lad's music.

The performance was still going strong, along with the men's keen attentiveness, when the sun set behind the gold-tipped Ligurian mountains. At the same time, the wind picked up from the west and this naturally led me to issue the necessary commands. In a minute, the crew's melancholy hoisting chants and sounds of the capstan were heard instead of the wonderfully soft guitar music.

With the anchor heaved and all sails set, *Lilly* slipped like a swan onto the ocean's dark and rippled surface. We left beautiful Genoa behind, wrapped in a mantle of darkness and decorated by jewels of light that numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

En route to Sicily

Despite all the manpower issues during our voyage from Mexico to Italy, I had still made various improvements to *Lilly* in Genoa. She was thoroughly cleaned, the cabins were painted and varnished, some new furniture was made for her, a wind pump was installed, and many new sails were sewn. All this was done by Genovese workmen.

Because I hired longshoremen to unload cargo from *Lilly*'s hold and then bring ballast on board, my crew, at least those who were aboard the ship at the time, were available to paint the spars and scrape and oil the masts, topmasts and the jib boom.

The exterior of the ship's hull was painted by some men I hired in the harbour.

As a result of all this work *Lilly* was clean, looked lovely and was in good repair. Also, the work I contracted out was not expensive because wages and materials were a bargain in Genoa. About an hour before we sailed out from there, I received a telegram from Meyer saying he had finally found a mate for *Lilly* and the man was on his way to Genoa.

The new mate, of course, would learn that we were no longer there and would follow us to Trapani.

After crossing the Ligurian Sea we sailed south along the east coast of Corsica, between the northern tip of Corsica and Capraia Island, passing Elba Island off to our east. Eighty-three years before we sailed there, Elba Island, with its 30,000 inhabitants and capital city of Portoferraio, had been Napoleon's 'kingdom' for almost nine months. Then he fled the island and assumed the French throne again, for 100 days, before being exiled to the island of St. Helena.⁶⁴

After sailing past the islands of Pianosa and Montecristo, which also lay to our east, we reached the Tyrrhenian Sea.

We'd had favourable winds until then but now the wind turned against us and we frequently had to tack. In doing so we sometimes were close to the coastlines of Tuscany and Campania and sometimes to the Corsican coast. The maneuvering allowed me to see the small island of Caprera, near the northern tip of Corsica. Garibaldi made this island his home during the final years of his life when he lived there as a farmer.

One dark night our maneuvering took us close enough to Naples to see the city's lights shining beneath a dark layer of cloud. A bit further to the south but quite a bit above sea level we could faintly see Mt. Vesuvius. About 25 years earlier, the same year I was born, the volcano had its last major eruption and caused much damage.

In the daytime, the yellowish-white cloud over Vesuvius could be seen far out to sea because the wind blew from the south and would not allow smoke from the volcano to rise straight up. Instead, a large trail of smoke, as if from a steamship, streamed to the north.

At last the wind turned to the east and took us closer to Trapani, on Sicily's west coast.

Sailing as close to the island as possible, we approached Trapani, located on the north shore of a small bay. The entrance to the bay was narrow and sinuous, like a river mouth. Because the port did not have a tugboat, *Lilly* was required to sail all the way into the bay before she reached the harbour. This would have been challenging even under the best

⁶⁴ The Treaty of Fontainebleau granted Napoleon the island of Elba to retire on. After 9 months there, taking issue with events in Europe, he returned to the French throne. Within 100 days, the French were defeated at Waterloo and in October 1815 Napoleon was exiled to St. Helena, a British island in the Atlantic Ocean.

conditions and looked like it would be very difficult as the wind blew directly against us.

And yet, a large pilot boat with seven strong islanders was waiting near the entrance to the bay. As soon as the pilot boat pulled beside *Lilly* three men quickly and skillfully climbed out and came up to our deck. One of the men took the wheel and the others stood in the middle of the deck to help guide the ship into the bay, assisting with everything that was required. The sinuous passage meant *Lilly's* sails had to be trimmed.

With great skill and know-how, they guided the ship through the bay's winding entrance in the unfavourable wind, until we were very close to the harbour. Then *Lilly* had to be turned into the wind. By then, the men had finished taking in all the square sails and, at the last minute, they aligned all the topgallant-royal yards with the keel and then braced them. At the same time, the pilot boat darted in front of *Lilly* to fasten the towrope, which they'd prepared earlier for towing us in. The four men in the boat pulled so powerfully on the long, heavy oars that we saw the oars flex. This is how *Lilly* kept up her momentum while heading straight into the wind, as though pushed by a propeller. While the ship was steered directly to the pier where cargo would be loaded aboard the remaining sails were quickly doused and stowed. Then some men on the pier grabbed the lines tossed down to them and secured these to piles. After the ship had docked, all seven strongmen gathered around with their broad smiling faces and wished me good luck.

I thanked them for the great job of bringing the ship in and gave each man a few Lira. They were very happy and praised *Lilly*, saying that ships like her were rarely seen in Trapani and could only be brought into the harbour when the wind blew from the east as it was doing that day.

Marsala's vineyards

Trapani is the capital city of a Sicilian province bearing the same name and has a population of 60,000. Carthage took control of the city in 260 BC when its name was Drapana.

Like all ancient cities, Trapani had narrow, winding roads and small two and three-storey stone buildings but was quiet and clean. In the evenings, citizens gathered beneath especially lush trees on the promenade

near the ocean to walk in the fresh sea air or sit and listen to music while drinking boiled water and lemon juice from tall glasses. I didn't see a single drunk person while I was there even though the population practically lived in valleys lined with grapes that were used to produce the famous Marsala wine. The landscape south of Trapani was a flat bare expanse that held salt basins and hundreds of small windmills to pump seawater out from them, so water could evaporate from the brine until only salt was left. The salt harvested in this fashion was loaded aboard lighters and brought to the port of Trapani to be shipped elsewhere.

The Russian Consul in Trapani owned a large wine export business. He was very friendly and immediately invited me to visit his vineyard.

Mr. Meyer had asked me to bring back a full barrel (422.5 liters) of Marsala wine so I accepted the Consul's invitation. I planned to tour his vineyard and select some wine to purchase.

We set out from the Consul's apartment early the next morning in a two-wheeled cart. The vineyard was located between Trapani and Marsala. When we reached the city boundary we had to stop at the customs house where the cart was searched. Because the trip to his vineyard took between two and three hours, we stopped to have a cup of coffee in a few places along the way. On our return trip to Trapani, the cart was searched again at the city limits. In those days, each city levied and collected their own taxes and there were customs houses at city boundaries for this purpose.

The Consul's vineyard was large and had long, narrow cellars built deep underground where large hogshead barrels lay in endless rows. The end of each barrel was marked to show when it had been filled and with which type of wine. One barrel was more than 60 years old.

In addition to the barrel of wine that I purchased, the Consul gave me a 40-liter barrel of sweet white wine as a gift, calling it 'ladies wine'. Although sweet, this wine was as enjoyable as the others.

After having lunch at the vineyard, we headed back to Trapani along the same road that brought us there. This was the road that Garibaldi's soldiers had marched along 37 years before us. Garibaldi landed in Messina on May 11, 1860 with 1,000 men, planning to seize Sicily from the King of Naples, who had 50,000 men guarding the island. On the way from

Messina to Trapani, Garibaldi's force doubled from 1,000 to 2,000 men. After conquering Trapani and Calatafimi, Garibaldi attacked Palermo, a city protected by 15,000 men loyal to the King. Garibaldi's force grew daily as he conquered one fortress after another and by the end of July 1860 he had conquered all of Sicily.

When the last of the ballast was being discharged from *Lilly*'s hold, the new mate arrived at the ship. I immediately recognized him as the former boatswain of barque *Aleksander*. Eight years before, he had been kind and courteous to me when I visited his ship in St. Petersburg looking for work. Since then he had passed the exams to qualify as a mate and a master.

The sailmaker we left behind in Ajaccio's hospital also returned to *Lilly* the same day. Spry and healthy, he looked like he had never been ill with scurvy. He seemed entirely unlike the sick man I had scooped up in my arms from his bunk, like a child, and carried across *Lilly*'s deck to the boat that took him to hospital.

The arrival of these men made me feel as though a heavy weight had been lifted from my chest. The ship had been without a mate for more than 6 months, and for 6 months before that I had needed to keep a close eye on a scoundrel of a mate. Now I had an experienced and trustworthy mate aboard the ship and an experienced sailmaker who had rejoined the crew three months after we last saw him.

So now, after nine months, I once again had a full complement of 12 men aboard *Lilly* and their collective skillset was much better than before.

A Fenian

The Fenian Brotherhood is the name of a secret old Irish revolutionary brotherhood founded to free Ireland from British rule.

The organization's name, in Irish, is *Fianna*, named after the mythical band of men that protected Irish kings. The band consisted of volunteers and its first leader had been the Irish hero Fionn mac Cumhaill.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ The Fenian Brotherhood, founded 1858 in the U.S., was an Irish republican organization having roots back to the late 1700s and a clandestine organization called the United Irishmen, that had been suppressed by the British. The Brotherhood was named after the *Fianna*, a legendary group of Irish warriors led by Fionn mac Cumhaill.

I had heard and read about this organization years before but never met any of its members, nor did I expect that here, in this small Sicilian port where *Lilly* was the only ocean-going cargo vessel, I would meet a Fenian on the day before we sailed out.

The last few lighters filled with cargo were being delivered to *Lilly* and loaded into her hold while I finished writing some letters. I was going to take these to the post office on my way to get clearance for the ship to leave port after she'd been fully loaded and I knew the total weight of her cargo.

Stepping out on deck, I saw a ballasted British barkentine sail into the mouth of the bay in a tailwind. I ordered our national flag raised beneath *Lilly's* gaff and went to the end of the pier to greet the newcomer.

When one of the pilots saw me standing on the pier he turned to the barkentine's captain and said something as he pointed toward me and then at *Lilly*. The captain took a few steps toward the railing, lifting his cap high in the air and spinning it around, and yelled, "How do you do, captain!" in a powerful voice that boomed like a foghorn.

"Welcome to Trapani, captain!" I called back, similarly twirling my cap.

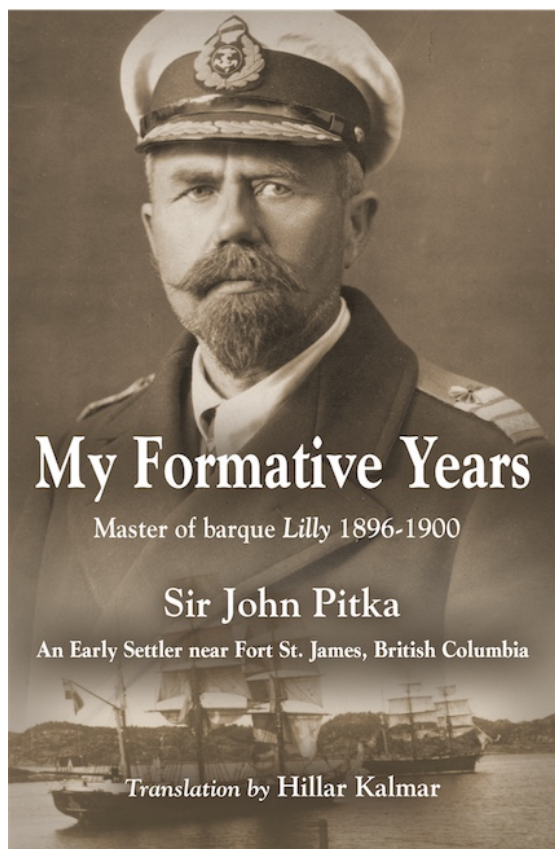
Immediately after this exchange, lines were thrown from the ship to the pier and used to pull down the heavy mooring ropes they were tied to. Soon the barkentine was tied up beside the pier. Then the ship put out her ladder and the captain came beside it and motioned for me to climb aboard. His strong, large hand grabbed mine in a hearty handshake, squeezing it so hard that my eyes began to water. My hand stayed numb for a long time afterward.

The captain, a spry, pure-blooded Irishman from Cork, was blond, six and a half feet tall and commensurately broad and well-proportioned. He was lively, impulsive, effusively talkative and very warm and friendly.

After sitting down with him for only 15 minutes, I was already caught up with Irish politics and their struggle for independence from England. He made it clear, in uncertain terms, that the Irish were justified in using whatever means were necessary to obtain their independence because generations of Englishmen had committed terrible injustices against them. After five more minutes, I learned that my new friend was a full-blooded

MY FORMATIVE YEARS

Fenian. I decided it was time to end my visit because if I spent another five minutes with him, I, a pure-blooded Estonian, might become a Fenian myself. As we said goodbye I couldn't keep my sore hand from suffering another powerful squeeze.



My Formative Years is a first-hand account of Sir John Pitka's 1896-1900 voyages as master of barque Lilly. Having responsibility for a ship, crew and cargo required leadership and Pitka's narrative shows how he developed the initiative, decision making skills and confidence seen later during WWI and while homesteading in Canada.

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