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Memories of a "sailors' sweetheart"

I never thought that the task I was assigned 31 years ago by what was then a short-wave station would lead to a lifelong profession in radio. I was in charge of and moderated the monthly greetings and request programme, "Sailor's Mailbag". It was through this that I came into contact with interesting themes and people, as well as with eccentric cranks. These men had signed on for a life on the open seas either because they wanted to see the world or they wanted to flee the narrow confines of their homeland.

Contacts took the form of messages from listeners in Switzerland, many of whom sent the trio of moderators a bottle of wine or a sample of their home-made baking; or letters, postcards and personal encounters with listeners throughout the world.

I had mixed feelings about a letter written to me on light blue paper with a pretty seagull motif. It had been sent by a very young sailor who had obviously been carried away by his romantic daydreams, without realising that he had only fallen in love with my voice...

I always enjoyed visits from sailors on leave, who came to the radio studio in Berne primarily with the aim of seeing the "sailors' sweetheart" and matching the face to the voice. Not infrequently such visits ended with a jolly evening in the cellar of Gerechtigkeitsgasse 15 in Berne, the venue of the Berne Section of the Swiss Sailors' Club, where I was elected honorary member and awarded Permit No. 1.

Many a seaman's yarn is spun, memories revived and sports or social events organised in the seven sections of the 37-year-old Sailors' Club. The other main activity is singing, especially in Berne and Basle. The "Störtebekers" choir from Basle boasts a very high standard. With their broad repertoire of sea songs and shanties they have won many friends and admirers at public performances.

But back to the era of the "Sailor's Mailbag" on short-wave radio. I once received a letter from the Blue Cross, asking me to use my programme to discourage the consumption of alcohol on ocean-going vessels and requesting that I leave out my comment that the mes-

when I became witness to a "moving" farewell scene that is well-known to sailors. The radio officer had to leave the ship in Amsterdam in order to join another vessel. While he was saying his goodbyes to the officers, some of his colleagues took advantage

of the opportunity to get hold of his suitcase and slide half a Tilsit cheese seething with maggots among the victim's snow-white shirts. Not long afterwards he disembarked blissfully unaware of his extra baggage, as the crew waved from the gangway with a fixed expression of sadness on their faces.

After I moved to Radio DRS in 1973 I sorely missed my nautical work. So several years later, after a sleepless night, I came up

with the idea of a "Sailor's Mailbag in reverse", that I christened "Greetings from afar...". This programme was broadcast at the end of the year and lasted around ten years. The messages of distant sailors were relayed to the Berne Radio HEB coastal radio station and broadcast to homes in Switzerland by Swiss Radio DRS.

sage would cost recipients only two crates of beer. At that time there was an unwritten rule on board ships that every greeting aired on the programme had to be celebrated with a crate of beer for the crew. But when we played Freddy Quinn singing about the boy who would soon return – a hugely popular request among listeners – then the "penalty" increased to two crates. Naturally we played along with this tradition. But at the request of the Blue Cross we decided to do away with this popular custom.

Now and again wives and mothers, girlfriends and brides (sometimes two for the same sailor) dropped in at our studio to record their greeting personally on tape. I was once astonished when an excited mother suddenly produced a canary from her cardboard box. After the nervous bird refused to even give a peep, its owner suddenly chirped into the microphone: "Ou dr Hansi laht di grüesse!" (Hansi sends his greetings, too).

One event I will never forget happened on my fact-finding trip on the freighter "Calanda". We were all enjoying a delicious fondue on a wave-force 6 sea,

Since then much has changed. The good old "Sailors' Mailbag" is a thing of the past, "Greetings from afar..." was shelved due to lack of interest, and short-wave radio is losing importance in an age of phonecards and jet planes. Of the 450 Swiss sailors plying the high seas at that time, only around two dozen are still active. But I am left with the memory of a unique adventure on the sound waves, contacts with sailors in the Sailors' Club, and a deep-seated, enduring yearning for faraway places.

Doris Spörry*

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The "Störtebekers" – the Sailors' Club Choir of Switzerland with Doris Spörry. (Photo: zvg).