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Life Story

Heinz Leuenberger – My Years as a Merchant Seaman

I was 24 years old when, in late 1956, I joined the P&O Shipping Co. at Tilbury, England, as 3rd baker on board the *Stratheden* - a 24,000 ton vessel carrying up to 1,050 passengers and 10,000 tons of refrigerated cargo - doing the "Aussie run". 80% of the 750 crew were Indian, Ceylonese or Lascars. I first boarded the ship ten days before sailing, giving me ample time to find my way from my 4-berth cabin to the galley.



In 1956, Eastern Europe was in turmoil, as was the Middle East. The Hungarian Revolution followed the Russian Invasion, once again putting world peace at risk. In June, Egypt's President Nassar nationalised the Suez Canal Company, which was jointly owned by France and Britain, and also banned Israel from using it. Preparations were already underway to retake the canal in due course, but Israel stepped in first with a pre-emptive attack in late October, in what was later to be known as the first Arab-Israeli War. Egypt then sank a number of ships in the canal, rendering it useless, so for the time being, all sea traffic between Europe, the Far East, and Australia had to be re-routed around the southern tip of the African Continent.



Due to thick fog coming in with the tide on the Thames Estuary, our departure was delayed by two days. Our destination was Sydney - via the Cape of Good Hope due the recent closure of the Suez Canal - with stops for rebunkering (refuelling/restocking) scheduled for Las Palmas (Canary Islands); Cape Town and Durban (South Africa); before crossing the Indian

Ocean to Fremantle, Melbourne, and ultimately Sydney. The trip went well until half way across the Indian Ocean, where engine problems forced the Captain to reduce speed from 17 down to 14 knots. Arriving in Melbourne, it was decided this would have to be the 'turn-around' port, so the Sydney passengers had to finish their journey by train. Engineers worked non-stop, but speed had been further reduced to 10 knots, so we were unable to carry passengers. So, for the return journey, 10,000 sheep carcasses were loaded into the ship's chillers instead!

On the trip back to England, we encountered a very unusual weather phenomenon. Sailing along the Portuguese Coast, there was a strong south-westerly wind with a balmy 25° temperature. We were on deck enjoying the mid-winter sun when suddenly a dark wall of cloud came over the horizon from the north-west. Word came from the Bridge to clear the deck as a snow storm was to hit shortly. Sure enough, within minutes, it was actually snowing!

For my next trip, I was promoted to 2nd baker, in charge of the night shift. As a matter of routine before departure, the Captain, accompanied by the Purser and Doctor, inspected the ship, including the Galley, to make sure all was in order. To impress, the Chief Baker asked me to prepare a Swiss speciality, so I made Züpfle and Gipfeli - the Captain was so delighted that he asked that these be made daily for the Captain's table!

On the next trip, we made it all the way to Sydney. But on the return journey, the bread-dough machine broke down, with no spare parts on board to repair it. The chief baker and I had an emergency meeting - I was the only one on board with any experience of making bread dough by hand - and so from then on I worked every day from 4pm to 6am. I worked out that on this 116 day trip we had produced about 200,000 breakfast buns!

Coming back after two week's leave, my request to move from the bakery to the galley was finally granted, and I transferred to the 'HMS Empire Fowey', stationed at Southampton. The Suez Canal had just reopened and we were once again able to use this short-cut. But at this point in time, it was still very much a war zone, and for quite some



Empire Fowey in Port Aden

distance the canal formed the front line. To the East, the Israelis were dug in, as were the Egyptians opposite, who also had a natural disdain for anything British – and in particular for the 'Empire Fowey'. Eight months earlier, this same ship had brought 3,500 assault troops to Port Said - so it was no wonder the Egyptians were seeking some kind of retribution. To be prepared for any possible trouble, the British Government seconded a Brigadier General to come on board to take command of the 2,400 military passengers should it be necessary. Army communications installed a powerful transmitter for the sole purpose of maintaining uninterrupted contact with the British Garrison in Cyprus, should trouble erupt.

We arrived off Port Said at midday in the 19th July 1957. Earlier that morning we were advised by the Bridge that should the entrance to the canal be blockaded, the Captain would turn around and head back to Gibraltar. And if no solution could be negotiated, we would once again travel the long way around the Cape of Good Hope. The Canal Pilot came on board when we were still some 10km off shore, bringing encouraging news - there was quite a large number of small vessels trying to blockade the entrance, but the Police were out in force and ably managing to keep them at bay! The thousands of protesters lining the breakwater on the western side of the canal, which reaches about 3km out into the Mediterranean, could not present any problems! Some tried to get in front of our bow, but without luck. Our convoy had reached the



Along the Suez Canal



middle of the city - and no sooner had we come to a stop when at least 50 fully armed policemen came on board and dispersed on the decks. We were ordered over the PA system to label all photographic equipment and deposit it into the transit container – taking photos whilst in transit through the canal was looked upon as an act of treason, and punishable by death. But, to this day, I have two pictures I took of two burnt-out personnel carriers stuck in the sand at the top of a 10m high cutting!!

The middle section of the canal formed the front line - Israeli and Egyptian forces, with tank turrets and other guns pointing at us - were dug in everywhere. In this tense situation, a 'loose trigger-finger' could easily have sparked a local or even international conflict. At one point, we faced a line of at least 20 artillery gunners, ready to fire at point blank range!

Once past the front line, we all breathed a sigh of relief. Then whilst waiting at anchor in the Great Bitter Lake for the north bound convoy to come past, we were 'visited' by a flight of four MiG aircraft from a nearby airfield. They circled the anchorage several times before disappearing behind a sand cloud, but only to return in attack formation. We were on deck for our afternoon break as they came diving down towards our position, with the rockets and bombs strapped under their wings clearly visible, even from a distance. Some 200m from the ship, they pulled up, turned around, and repeated their manoeuvre from the other side. After that, they just left and we were finally left alone.

In these 'attacks', we all automatically dived for even the flimsiest of covers - not that it would have been of any use to us at all !!

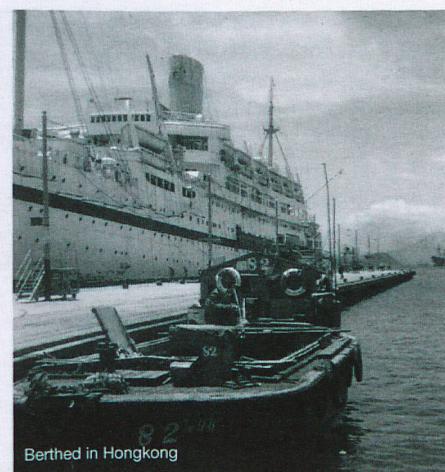
About six weeks later, we returned to the Suez Canal. By then the forces had all retreated - even the two burnt-out personnel carriers I photographed had been removed. Coming out of the canal, we were diverted to Cypress to pick up 200 military personnel - which turned out to be another 'tragically comic' situation. There had already been simmering hostility between the Greeks and Turks for some time, and a British garrison tried to keep them apart. From 160 miles out, we were escorted by two Royal Navy Corvettes and two fighter aircraft to give us all the protection we might require. Big pontoons were

shipped out into the Bay. Passengers from land were transported to this point in boats - but before they could board the ship, all of their belongings were emptied out onto the pontoon to make absolutely sure no terrorist explosive devices could be smuggled on board.

Some evenings later, a few of the galley crew met with some of the NCO's, and during a conversation with an Airforce Sergeant we learnt something about life in Cypress. We were told that over one weekend (in July 1957) the Airforce was on red-alert! The bomber squadron was fully fuelled and bombed up, ready to take off at a moment's notice. It was lucky for us, in the middle of all this drama, as well as for the rest of the world, that everyone involved in this conflict was able to keep cool heads and their emotions in check!!

I made another four trips to Hong Kong, before returning permanently to shore in 1958.

Article compiled by Beatrice Leuenberger



Payment of the Swiss Pension (AHV) in New Zealand

While over in Switzerland to attend the Council of the Swiss Abroad Conference, our President Hans Vetsch asked me to clarify rumours and uncertainties concerning the Swiss Pension (AHV). He has apparently been approached over this issue on numerous occasions. There seems to be the arbitrary assumption or misconception by some people that the Swiss old age pension (AHV) can also be paid out in one large sum to Swiss citizens immigrating to New Zealand.

To obtain a satisfactory answer which I could also understand and pass on, it took me 3 emails and a longer phone call with the people in Geneva, as the legal wording I got back in the emails was so difficult and abstract even for me to understand.

The situation is straight forward and as follows:

- What is relevant is the nationality of the person receiving the Swiss Pension (AHV). If they are **Swiss** or have the **nationality of an EU/EFTA country**, they will receive a monthly pension, wherever they live.
- If they have the **nationality of a country with which Switzerland has signed a social security agreement**, they may be entitled to a monthly pension, to a payment in one sum (for small pensions) and/or to the reimbursement of their contributions, depending on the agreement.
- Persons that have the nationality of a country with which Switzerland has not signed any social security agreement and live outside of Switzerland, only have the possibility to get their contributions reimbursed.

In other words, a Swiss citizen living in New Zealand will only be able to receive a monthly pension, whereas a citizen of New Zealand will only be entitled to the reimbursement of his contributions.

Peter Ehrler
Elected Council Member of the Swiss Abroad
Representing New Zealand