

STETTIN (SZCZECIN)

A NODE IN A GEOPOLITICAL NETWORK

by **Thomas Lundén**

In a Polish context, Szczecin (German: Stettin) is a medium-sized city, located in the northwestern corner of the country, with poor connections to the capital, Warsaw, and with a declining economy of shipping and shipbuilding. But for many centuries, Stettin was much more important, commercially and geopolitically, as its relative proximity to Sweden and its natural resources formed a north-south axis of “coal-for-iron” trade.

Commercial shipping, like other types of transportation, rests on an interaction among dealers, artifacts, places, and, of course, goods to be transported. An additional factor is the political: the formal rules that those involved are supposed to obey – at least in theory. In shipping, the seas form an additional “gray zone” of rules about territorial waters, economic zones, and bilateral agreements that are utilized or transgressed by states, shipping companies, and captains. The history of Stettin is an example of how the relative force of these factors changes, and how in turn they change realities. In wartime, different rules apply – even for states that are not formally involved.

Stettin is located in the Oder River Valley, which is around eight kilometers wide. This was the northernmost point where overland connections between east and west were possible, with the exception of the complicated estuary in the delta of the Oder and Swine rivers (in Polish, Odra and Świna) on the Baltic coast. The town was also protected from the dangerous coast by the large lagoon between Stettin and Swinemünde (Świnoujście).

Stettin is mentioned in eleventh-century documents as a trading post between Germanic and Slavic-speaking tribes. The intrusion of Germanic colonization resulted in Magdeburg Rights in 1243, and Stettin played an important role in the herring trade with Skåne in Denmark. Politically, the town was mostly the capital of the Duchy of Pomerania, but for around 80 years it was capital of the Swedish province of the same name. In 1720, Szczecin was captured by Prussia,



which later became the core of the German Empire.

Contacts with Scandinavia did not cease in 1720. During the 18th century, Stettin was an important importer of Swedish train oil and an exporter of grain.¹ While Stettin was under Swedish rule, the neighboring state of Brandenburg (later Prussia) built canals from the Oder River towards Berlin in order to direct trade away from Pomerania. After annexation by Prussia, Stettin became the major port for both Berlin and Breslau (Wrocław). Its importance grew with industrialization. The Oder River flows from the Silesian coal district, and when the iron ore of northern Sweden became technically usable for steel production thanks to the Thomas process, Stettin was in a strategic position, particularly after Germany lost the Lothringian mines in 1919.² Coal from Silesia could also be exported to Sweden, which had no coal. The river is not always navigable, but the Prussian state built a dense net of railways. The Gällivare iron mine was connected to Luleå in 1888, permitting export by ship. The Kiruna mine was connected to Narvik on the Norwegian ice-free Atlantic coast in 1902, but the Luleå-Stettin connection was shorter, simpler and – particularly during wartime – safer.

On the German side, the Swine River was canalized in 1870 and connected to Stettin in 1889 by a deep fairway across the lagoon. The Oder River was prepared for shipping from Breslau almost all year, except during icy conditions. The building of icebreakers became a Stettin specialty, with different versions for the rivers and the lagoon. In 1898, the emperor inaugurated a free port, and traffic on the Oder reached a peak. In 1914 Stettin was again connected to Berlin by a canal with locks to manage the 36-meter difference in elevation. Stettin in 1910 was Germany’s biggest Baltic seaport, with exports of grain, sugar, flour, cement, and chemicals.³

Luleå, at the other end of the Baltic Sea, developed into northern Sweden’s leading seaport, not least through iron ore exports. The arriving tonnage had increased considerably, and in 1900 Sweden’s largest cargo ship, the Nordstjernan shipping company’s *Oscar Fredrik*, loaded 7,000 tons for her maiden voyage. From 1914 to 1915, the number of ships loaded increased from 296 to 985. Iron exports to Germany beat all previous records.⁴ Why?

The First World War had begun. While Sweden was neutral, Germany was at war with Great Britain, France, and Russia. Sweden needed coal and Germany needed iron ore. German ships shuttled between Stettin and Luleå, while Russian submarines searched for prey. German ships sought refuge in Swedish territorial waters, and some of these were sunk or hijacked by Russian submarines or destroyers. Russia in such cases falsely asserted they were in international waters, though some German ships clearly were outside Swedish jurisdiction when they were attacked.⁵ Almost all such incidents occurred in 1916: for later, the situation in Russia became revolutionary and Russia’s war effort weaker, and after Lenin’s coup against the weak Kerensky government in 1917 Russia established a truce with Germany.



PHOTO: PUST-NORBEN/IDE

Three generations: Wilhelm, Werner, and Arthur Kunstmann.

But shipping is subject to other dangers too. From a diver's report:

Cargo-ship *Hansa*, built 1910 at Stettiner Oderwerke AG. Purchaser: Neue Dampfer Co. AG, Stettin. Material: Steel. Speed: 13 knots. Home: Stettin. Crew: 18. Load: Iron ore. Wrecked: July 29, 1917, on route Luleå–Stettin. Place: Öja Bremersvik (south of Nynäshamn, Stockholm). Cause: Collision with fishing vessel.⁶

With the Versailles treaty, the geopolitical conditions changed. There was a ban on the extension of the Stettin free port.⁷ After a contested referendum, the region of Upper Silesia was divided between a reduced Germany and a reinstated Poland.⁸ Poland now tried to steer coal exports away from German territory, and to that end built a harbor at Gdynia, its only safe access to the Baltic Sea.⁹ Because of Poland's partial annexation of Silesia, Stettin lost its position as the major exporter of coal and grain. In 1919, turnover had fallen to the level of 1873.

The creation of the Polish Corridor and Danzig's position as a free city under the formal dominion of Poland makes Stettin's outer harbor, Swinemünde, a sea link to East Prussia and a naval base.¹⁰ But Stettin's contacts with Luleå and other Swedish Baltic seaports continue. Hitler's assumption of power initiates a rearmament that requires Swedish iron ore. In 1936, a Swede, Gösta Häggkvist, makes a vacation voyage from Luleå to Germany, and shoots a film. From the script: "Loading of iron ore from stockpiles in railway cars . . . Cargo ship *Viktoria W. Kunstmann* (7800 tons) at the loading dock . . . At sea on the *Viktoria* . . ." On the boat, "my fellow passengers, members of Hitler Youth in Stettin" who were given this voyage to Luleå and back as a bonus for doing good work. So "the first German buoy, Swinemünde. Ships in Stettin harbor. Iron ore being unloaded. A glimpse of Stettin. North German landscape shot from the train to Berlin." The film continues with his trip by train and ferry back to Sweden.¹¹

The Kunstmann ships were a well-known sight in Luleå Harbor.¹² But after this, the ship *Viktoria W. Kunstmann* disappears from the records. What happened? Looking for information: The ship was owned by the shipping company W. Kunstmann in Stettin until 1936, but was later renamed SS Radbod and was sunk by British Beaufighter airplanes near Ålesund, Norway, on December 5, 1944. But why did it change its name?

The answer is political. The shipping company

“THE VOYAGE OF THE VIKTORIA W. KUNSTMANN IN 1936 WAS PROBABLY THE LAST TRIP THE HAPPY HITLER YOUTH WOULD TAKE ON A ‘JEWISH’ SHIP.”

W. Kunstmann was established in Swinemünde on April 1, 1870, by Wilhelm Kunstmann, born in 1844. Its first ships were a brig, the *Adler*, and a schooner, the *Minna*. In 1889, Kunstmann launched its first steamer, the *Clara Siegmann*. After that, all Kunstmann ships were steamers, with names ending in *-ia*. A Stettin office opened in 1886, later to become the company's headquarters. From 1915 on, all ships were christened with the family name Kunstmann. Their main task was to ship iron ore from Luleå, Oxelösund, and Gävle to Stettin, where it was sent on river barges or by rail to Silesia. The Kunstmann company purchased the Mercur Shipyard in Stettin.

After 1933, the operations became increasingly insecure, and in 1936 the company was forced to sell. The Kunstmann family was Jewish. A non-Jewish company, Johannes Fritzen & Sohn, bought them out, and the purchase price was transferred to Great Britain, where the Kunstmanns had been able to emigrate in time. Both buyer and seller were punished for illegal monetary transactions, and Werner Kunstmann Jr., the son of Albert Kunstmann, who died in 1940, spent four months in a British prison for his "cooperation with Nazi Germany". His father had been awarded an honorary doctorate and an honorary title of Senator at the University of Greifswald; he had been a board member of two German shipowners' associations and a member of the German delegation to the League of Nations in the 1920s, but all his titles were made void by the Nazi Government. His academic titles were posthumously reinstated in 2000.¹³

The voyage of the *Viktoria W. Kunstmann* in 1936 was probably the last trip the happy Hitler Youth would take on a "Jewish" ship. First Jewish property was eliminated; later, the Jews themselves. But the Swedish-German coal and ore trade continued, even increased (ref. Fritz, 1974).

In 1939 a new shipyard was built in Stettin for smaller vessels and submarines, and in 1940 a naval base was established. "As during the First World War, Stettin developed during World War II as the main transfer place for traffic with Scandinavia."¹⁴ In October 1940, the ship *Isar* called at Luleå in neutral Sweden. The *Isar* had been used earlier that year in "Operation Weserübung", the Nazi attack on Norway.¹⁵ The *Isar* deliv-



PHOTO: PUST-NORBEN/IDE

Viktoria W. Kunstmann.

ered a German military division for further transport to occupied Norway. A German warehouse for provisions and equipment was established at Luleå, and evidently supplied by sea for some years.¹⁶ But there was traffic in the opposite direction, too. The Swedish vessels *Viril* and *Wormo*, built in the 1930s, were chartered in 1942 by the "Fischereinkaufsgemeinschaft Norwegen" to deliver fresh fish from Luleå to Stettin.

Starting in 1943, Stettin, Swinemünde, and Pölitz (the site of a plant for refining Silesian coal into aviation fuel) were targeted by Allied bombers. British bombers on their way to Stettin and Königsberg passed over Sweden and were attacked by German fighters. In the spring of 1945, the Soviet Army advanced while retreating German troops blew up bridges and port facilities. The Soviet Union took over the Stettin harbor, while Pölitz, Swinemünde, and the city of Stettin, all on the western side of the Oder, were put under Polish administration as an exception to the Oder-Neisse line drawn at the Potsdam Conference.¹⁷ The German population was expelled. In June, the ship *Poseidon* had already delivered the first group of repatriated Poles, returning west with expelled Germans. In July, the *Isar*, the same that had participated in Operation Weserübung and called at Luleå in 1940, was carrying Poles from Lübeck to Stettin, probably Polish slaves now going "home" to Szczecin, which was being emptied of its German population. The *Isar*, after changing names and owners several times, ended up in Turkey, and was scrapped in 1965.

The port was sufficiently repaired for the Soviet administration to be able to ship industrial equipment from Berlin and Stettin to the Soviet Union as reparations. All major industries in Stettin were dismantled, including the double tracks of the railroads. Only part of the harbor was available to the new Polish administration. In late May 1946, the Polish shipping company Poltrans unloaded the first barges of Silesian coal, destined both for local consumption and export. On June 19, the Swedish ship MS *Ruth* unloaded viscose for the artificial silk plant in Wrocław, formerly Breslau. Another Swedish ship, the MS *Anna Greta*, was the first to be provisioned by the Polish State Center of Trade.¹⁸ Because of a death on the quay of Stettin in 1946, another Swedish ship, the steamer *Havsbris* of Stockholm, was involved in a maritime declaration at the City Court of Malmö, but the circumstances are unknown.¹⁹

On March 5, 1946, Winston Churchill delivered a lecture at a US college, saying, "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent." He was right in putting Stettin, now Szczecin, behind the Iron Curtain, but the very border between Soviet and Western power would



A view over Stettin.

PHOTO: WWW.FOOTSWEB.ANCESTRY.COM

“SZCZECIN BECAME A SLUICE FOR SMUGGLING JEWS TO THE BRITISH AND AMERICAN ZONES FOR FURTHER TRANSPORT TO PALESTINE OR THE UNITED STATES.”

run further west, at the limit of the Soviet Occupation Zone. But Swedish contact with Szczecin continued. Now all of Silesia (Śląsk) was Polish, and as before the Treaty of Versailles, all the transport routes were within the same state (although now a different one), with the exception of the River Oder, divided between Poland and its “socialist brother country”, the GDR.

The expulsion of Germans from territories under Polish administration met with enormous obstacles. In February 1946, Poland and Great Britain reached an agreement about the transportation of expellees: Operation Swallow would carry 1000 persons per day by sea from Szczecin to Lübeck and 1520 per day to Bad Segeberg by train. Poland would provide trains, food, and protection. But conditions were terrible. The transport through the Soviet Zone of Occupation to Schleswig-Holstein in the British Zone caused enormous problems. A reception camp in Gumience, Szczecin, was a former sugar plant without windows, doors, or furniture, and social conditions were appalling. The camp was planned to hold expellees for one or two days, but the train capacity to the British Zone could not cope with the flow of expellees. Even the Soviet authorities complained about conditions, while Poland replied that the expellees were in such bad condition that Szczecin was becoming one big hospital. Finally the British authorities managed to increase transport capacities to evacuate the German population.²⁰ A curious, tragic and paradoxical prehistory of Jewish transportation through Stettin was the brutal transportation in March 1940 of 1200 Jews from Stettin to Lublin in Nazi-Occupied Poland, which caused the usually Pro-Hitler Swedish explorer Sven Hedin to complain to Heinrich Himmler.²¹

A strange effect of the postwar conditions was that some Polish Jews pretended to be ethnic Germans in order to be transported to Western Germany.²² Transports from the areas of Eastern Poland annexed by the USSR brought about 25,000 Polish Jews to Szczecin in 1946. With the unclear situation just after the war, Szczecin became a sluice for smuggling Jews to the British and American zones for further transport to Palestine or the US. According to some reports, tens of thousands of Jews used Szczecin as a gateway to life abroad. A small portion of this exodus was legal. In November 1948, the ship *Beniowski* left Szczecin bound for Israel with 615 Polish Jews aboard.²³ What happened to this voyage is not clear from my sources, but the *Beniowski* had visited the town before. Under the name of *Kaiser*, it had been launched in 1905 from the Vulcan shipyard in Stettin to ply the North Sea

and the Elbe River, but it was bought by the Hamburg America Line. In 1919 it was taken over by Great Britain as a war reparation, but sold back to the former owner. After serving Germany in the Second World War, it was again made a war reparation to Great Britain, but was handed over to the Soviet Union and renamed the *Nekrasov*. In 1946 or '48 it was acquired by Polish owners and renamed the *Beniowski* (after a Polish explorer and adventurer), and after its voyage to the Mediterranean it sailed as a training ship along the Polish coast between Szczecin and Sopot/Gdynia, before finally being scrapped in 1954 – in Szczecin, 49 years after it was launched there.²⁴

The history of Stettin/Szczecin does not end with the scrapping of the *Kaiser/Nekrasov/Beniowski*. But in the 1950s, the local situation became more stable, for better and for worse, as did Poland's relations to the outer world. And that is another story, and another geography. ❌

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The synagogue in Stettin.



A newspaper ad.

PHOTO: PUST-NORBENDE

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