

South Jersey Post Card Club Newsletter

January 2005

Serving Post Card Collectors Since 1971

Re. Vol. 5 No. One

A "Mystery" Newsletter



The Disaster of the Wilhelm Gustloff. Sixty years ago.

by Ray Hahn

On the bitter cold night of January 30, 1945, the German Cruise Liner *Wilhelm Gustloff*, then serving as a barracks ship for the German Navy, left from the Baltic port of Gdynia and set sail for the relative safety of the west. Those on board were fleeing Soviet forces that were converging on the region. The *Gustloff*, designed to carry a maximum of 1,865 people, was transporting over 10,000, soldiers, sailors, and crew; many of whom were sick and injured. Also on board were women, children and elderly refugees who were being forced to leave Poland.

Just hours after its departure the *Gustloff* was torpedoed by the Soviet Submarine S-13 and sank in less than 50 minutes. Resulting in the most tragic loss of life in all of naval history.

The *Wilhelm Gustloff*, named for a man considered by many Germans to be a martyr, (Wilhelm Gustloff had been the leader of the Nazi Party in Switzerland and was assassinated in 1936) was launched in 1937 as the crown jewel of the Strength Through Joy organization, a subgroup of the German Labor Front. The Labor Front was organized in place of the unions that had been banned by the Nazi Party. The Labor Front had as its goal the control of the entire labor force, and the Strength Through Joy organization was used as a means of making political friends by providing perks such as trips, cruises, concerts, and cultural activities. By opening the door to accessible and affordable activities once reserved only for the rich, it was hoped that the labor force could be lulled into being more flexible and productive.

Until September 1939 the *Gustloff* sailed on pleasure cruises in the Atlantic, Mediterranean and North

Sea, but just three weeks after the German invasion of Poland, the *Wilhelm Gustloff* was officially commandeered into the Kriegsmarine for use as a hospital ship. Classified as Hospital Ship D, it was in this role that the *Gustloff* and its crew entered World War II. Records confirm that the first wounded taken on board were 685 soldiers from the defeated Polish Army.

In the coming 13 months *Gustloff* served mostly in Norway, but an option was kept open to send her to the North Sea as the primary hospital ship to serve the invasion of England. By 1945, serving as a barracks ship of the Kriegsmarine, *Gustloff* had lain at anchor in Gdynia, Poland, for over four years.

(Cont. Page 7. See: *Gustloff*)

South Jersey Postcard Club

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President's Corner . . .

Reflections on 2004

It seems as though last year flew by too quickly. But, I guess I say that every year. As I reflect on 2004, I realize that we have made some pretty big changes in the past 12 months.

We've been steadily auctioning off the remnants of Bill Kille's collection. Many folks we don't see too often have come to take part in these auctions. Let's hope we see more and more of these old friends in 2005. We will continue to dispose of Bill's collection - so stay tuned for auction announcements and updates.

PoCax'04 moved to a new location this year. Some folks think that attendance was lower than usual - but the numbers were encouraging. We continue to work on our publicity, which I believe is key to a stronger showing at the door. Everyone agrees that our new location is a HUGE improvement - a larger room, adequate parking, all-around nicer facilities - AND less work for us.

We decided to change PoCax'05 to a Fall show. This will give us more time to place ads, send announcements and, hopefully, increase attendance. Mark your calendar now -

**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2005.
DOUBLE TREE GUEST SUITES**

Ray Hahn continues to do an outstanding job on our newsletter. It seems that each newsletter outshines the previous one. We continue to look for story contributions, and hope that more members will take the time to write a little something to share. If you didn't do so last year, please take a moment and thank Ray for his hard work and expertise. He deserves our thanks!

Emily and Sal are the backbone of our Club. I don't know what I'd do without them. In addition to their regular contributions to each meeting, they are always willing to share ideas, provide insights, give historical perspectives, and sometimes - just listen. Everyone should take a moment to thank these two hardworking people for their ongoing efforts for SJPC.

As we begin a new Club year, let's work together to care a little more, share a little more, and pray for peace in 2005.

May your blessings be many and your troubles few!

Judi

Alvin "Shipwreck" Kelly

By Don Pocher



Alvin Kelly was born in New York in 1885. He created the fad of flag pole sitting. When he first started his act he would stand the entire time he was atop the pole; it wasn't until much later that he began sitting.

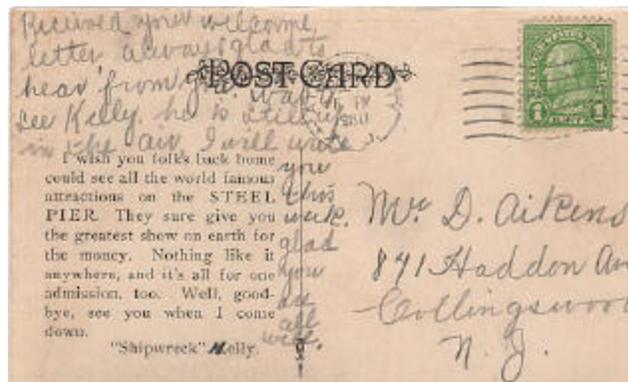
He set a world record perched atop a flag pole for seven weeks at the Steel Pier in Atlantic City, N.J. He learned to catnap during his performance by hooking his thumbs into holes in the flag staff. If he swayed while dozing, the pain in his thumbs would cause him to right himself without waking.

During his lifetime, he spent a total of 20,613 hours at the top of poles; 210 hours in sub-freezing temperatures, 1,400 in the rain and in winds as high as 55 MPH.

Kelly served in the Navy & Merchant Marine and also became a professional boxer. It was during his boxing career that he earned his nickname - he was decked so often that the fans would yell, "Sailor Kelly's been shipwrecked again."

In 1939, during *National Donut and Dunking Week*, Kelly was photographed on a plank sticking out of a 54th floor window of a New York City skyscraper. He was doing a head stand while eating donuts passed to him by an assistant.

Alvin Kelly collapsed and died, October 11, 1952, along the sidewalk on 51st Street east of 9th Avenue, *Hell's Kitchen*, very near where he was born.



Who is Shipwreck "Nelly"?

This is an especially interesting find. I guess someone named Nell was in Atlantic City in July 1930 and had the opportunity to see Kelly atop a pole.

She wrote to Mr. Aikens that "Kelly is still up in the air." She personalized the message by changing the K in Kelly to an N.

CAREER ENDEAVORS OF GEORGE GORDON MEADE JUPITER INLET LIGHTHOUSE, JUPITER, FLORIDA

by Judi and Tom Kearney



In late January 1852, the director of the United States Lighthouse Service, Steven Pleasonton recommended that a first class lighthouse be erected near Jupiter, Florida. But due to the removal of Mr. Pleasonton from his position and the abolishment of the Lighthouse Service and the creation of the new United States Lighthouse Board in October of 1852, Congress delayed appropriations for the

lighthouse until March of 1853.

The design of the lighthouse, submitted by Lieutenant **George Gordon Meade**, was approved for construction with architectural notations that a complete survey of the site and foundation construction should commence immediately. One of our nation's strangest ironies occurred here, when Captain **Robert E. Lee** was assigned the task of leading the survey team and to start the initial construction of the lighthouse foundations and ramparts using Lt. Meade's approved drawings.

Both Capt. Lee and Lt. Meade were part of the U. S. Army's Corps of Topographical Engineers. This unit was comprised of some of the best engineering graduates of the Naval and Military Academies. Lt. Meade included ramparts and fortifications surrounding the lighthouse due to the continuing outbreak of hostilities with the Seminole Indian Nation throughout Florida. At the time Capt. Lee was the Army's best engineer for laying out foundations and building defense breastworks. Lt. Meade was the best Army engineer for designing and building lighthouses. They were also quite knowledgeable of each others talents and had shared other experiences in 'the old Army.'

Lt. Meade's official title with the Topographical Engineers unit was Chief of Administrative Affairs of the 7th Lighthouse District. His approved design of **Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse** was given over to a subordinate, John W. Nystrem, who was given the responsibility for the final architectural appearance and issuance of the blueprints. All construction activity was supervised by Lt. Meade until late May of 1856 when he was assigned to Philadelphia to head both the 7th & 4th districts. Due to the outbreak of the Third Seminole War in late 1856 and subsequent delays, construction was restarted in 1858. Mostly as a result of bad weather and insect molestation, the lighthouse was not completed until May of 1860. Much like their confrontation at Gettysburg years later, Meade and Lee never were face to face at Jupiter Inlet. However, Lee's and Meade's efforts are visible everyday in Jupiter . . . the light house still stands . . . bold and strong.

One can only imagine the thoughts that General Robert Edward Lee had in late June of 1863 when he

learned of Major General George Gordon Meade's appointment by President Lincoln to assume command of the Army of the Potomac as Lee was heading his Army of Northern Virginia towards Pennsylvania and a date with destiny.

Judi & Tom Kearney are members of the **General George Meade Society** and **The South Jersey Post Card Club**



Kings & Queens of the Movies Series Postcards published by the **Max B. Sheffer Card Co.**



I confess, I don't know much about the "glory days" of Hollywood, but I do know that many people remember the 10s, 20s, and 30s era films fondly.

And, I know that there are many who collect postcards of the personalities of that time.

Recently I found a set of cards (two examples are shown here) of Kings and Queens of Hollywood. I found them interesting and

although I may be "town-criering" old news, if you are a 'Hollywood Personalities' collector it may be worth revisiting your collection.

Above: The Valentino card is of the great actor in his title role, when he co-starred with Agnes Ayres in the 1922 film *The Sheik*, a tatty, unsophisticated adaptation of E. M. Hull's exotic novel. But as they say, "the audience loved it."

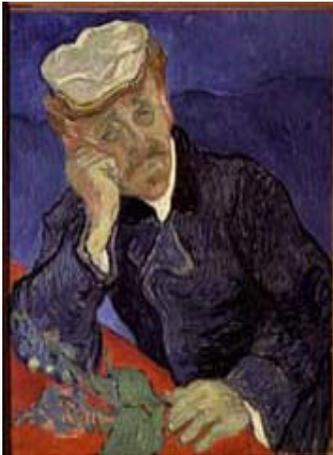
Right: The card of Alice Terry shows her as Princess Flavia in the 1922 version of *The Prisoner of Zenda*.

Here's a fact that everyone should know. The *Prison of Zenda* movie has been made eight times.

Count them: 1913, '15, '22, '37, '52, '79, '88 in animation, and '96 for TV.)



The Mystery of a Great Work of Art



In June 1890, Vincent Van Gogh, wrote: *I've done the portrait of Mr. Gachet with a melancholy expression, which might well seem like a grimace to those who see it... Sad but gentle, yet clear and intelligent, that is how many portraits ought to be done.*

In less than three minutes, on a mild, May evening in 1990, **Vincent van Gogh's Portrait of Dr. Gachet** became the world's most visible work of art, only to

vanish from view – its whereabouts still a mystery.

About 7:45, the rich, poignant likeness of **Paul-Ferdinand Gachet** – a Dutch physician – debuted in front of a packed salesroom at Christie's Auction House in New York. The bidding started at a respectable \$20 million and rose swiftly in increments of \$1 million, as if the bidders were proffering *Monopoly* money. 48 million, 49 million, 50 million. The room erupted in shouts and applause; bidding was furious. 73 million, 74 million, 75 million. The gavel finally came down, making art-world history. An unassuming Tokyo art dealer acquired **Portrait of Dr. Gachet** on behalf of an unknown client, for a total of \$82.5 million (\$75 million, plus a 10 percent buyer's commission). The record hammer price topped the previous champion, Van Gogh's *Iris*, by some \$30 million.

The masterpiece went straight from the limelight into a foam-padded packing crate and was shipped to a top-secret storeroom somewhere near Tokyo. *Gachet's* new owner, Japanese industrialist Ryohei Saito, spent a few hours with his purchase, and then locked it in a climate-controlled vault. And there it stayed, untouched and unseen, for seven years.

While the painting rested in its hiding place, Saito struggled, financially and otherwise. In 1993, he was charged with trying to bribe officials to allow the development of a golf course, which, ironically, was to be named Vincent. Wheelchair bound and broke; Saito pleaded guilty and received a three-year suspended sentence. During this time, he scandalized the art world by stating that he wanted Van Gogh's masterpiece cremated and buried with him upon his death – though he later said he was only joking.

No one laughed, especially after Santo's death in 1996, when it wasn't clear who owned the *Gachet* painting or even where it was. Museum curators and auction houses tried to locate it, but while representatives of Saito's company assured the world that it was still around, a veil of secrecy shrouded all future transactions. *Gachet* simply seemed to vanish.

Sadly, the mystery continues, *Gachet*, who wears what Van Gogh called "the heartbroken expression of our time," has almost certainly left Japan for a private collection. The person who owns it is just not interested in advertising the fact, most likely because of all the notoriety.

But where is it? Some say New York, some France, and some Switzerland. "People are just speculating."

New York art dealer Richard Feigen, who has his own theories about where it's *not*, says, "If the painting came to the United States, there would be people who knew – shippers, customs people. It couldn't come in an unopened crate and go right into storage, like in Switzerland."

Rumors still fly, says Cynthia Saltzman, author of the definitive book on the mystery, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet: the Story of a Van Gogh Masterpiece, Money, Politics, Collectors, Greed, and Loss*.

In writing her book, Saltzman tracked only dead ends. "[People] would say, 'Oh, I heard it from this person in Japan who heard it from that person in Singapore,'" she explains.

Lost in all the gossip is why it's important to return the painting to the public domain. *Gachet* is not merely the world's most expensive painting; it is an important part of Western Civilization that is lost.

Postcards of Van Gogh's painting are usually museum reproductions and are easily found with most dealers. The price range is \$1 to \$5.00.



The Reading Pagoda

by Sal Fiorello

Atop Mount Penn, near Reading, Pennsylvania, the casual tourist may not believe his eyes. There's a pagoda there.



1907

"Pagoda" is a Portuguese word for a tower-shaped building, often religious in purpose, common in China and other parts of Asia. Pagodas are usually found in association with Buddhist Temples and are believed to offer protection from the elements. As lightning generally strikes the highest structure in a vicinity, this protection is likely more imagined than real.



1936

The Reading Pagoda was built in 1908 by William Whitman. His intention was for it to be a resort. Whitman sold the Pagoda to Jonathan Mould in 1910 because Whitman couldn't get a liquor license for his resort. Some years later Mould sold it to the city of Reading for \$1.

Currently Pagoda-Skyline Inc., a volunteer group, is responsible for the upkeep. 30 thousand visitors a year make their way to the pagoda.

The Great Union Station Train Wreck of 1953



The "Federal Express" Train #173 left Boston late in the evening of January 14, 1953, with passengers headed to Washington, DC, for Dwight D. Eisenhower's first inauguration.

All went well for the first hour until a faulty brake caused a stop in Kingston Swamp, Rhode Island. The inspectors found an angle-cock that controlled the air brake connection between the third and fourth car was in the closed position. This condition prevented the cars to the rear of the third car from having the brake released from the locomotive. The angle-cock was opened, and train #173 proceeded - 56 minutes behind schedule.

When the train arrived in New Haven the diesel was changed for a New Haven Railroad electric locomotive, three cars were added, and the crew changed. With no mention of the earlier brake problem, the 16-car train left for New York 45 minutes late.

The brakes functioned properly between New Haven and New York, and the train arrived at Pennsylvania Station only 38 minutes late. While in New York, the electric locomotive was changed and train #173 left New York with GG1 number 4876 in the lead and engineer Harry Brower at the controls.



Throughout the early morning hours the "Express" made stops at Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore. The brakes were applied 14 times in the 200+ miles between New York and Baltimore without a problem and there is no record of any other mishap or malfunction.

Since the fourth car was destined for Baltimore it was set off and the train re-coupled. As he left Baltimore, engineer Brower set the controls for 80 mph and did not apply the brakes until the train reached signal #1339, which sets two miles from Washington's Union Station.

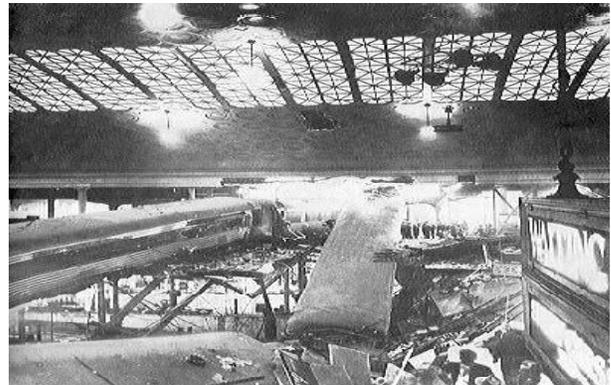
Immediately Brower knew something was very wrong. Applying the brakes did not slow the train, so Brower set the emergency brake, which should have brought the train to an immediate halt, but again #173 did not stop. It didn't even slow down!

It is now quarter after 8 a.m. and the train was running out of control on a downgrade on track 16 which dead-ended at the terminal. Brower knew that the brakes on the locomotive and the first few cars had applied, but

the rest of the cars were pushing the train right into the station. He stayed at the controls and repeatedly blew the GG1's horn, warning everyone away from the track.

The tower operator at the entrance to Union Station heard the horn blasts and knew their meaning. He called the stationmaster and told him that a runaway was coming on track 16 and to clear the way. Evacuation was immediate.

The train crashed through the wall, smashed into the stationmaster's office at the end of track 16, demolished the main news-stand and was sliding across the concourse toward the waiting room when the floor gave way and the



GG1 and two of the cars fell through the floor into the basement baggage room. The time of the wreck was established by a broken clock found in the debris, at 8:38 a.m.

87 people were injured in the crash, but luckily, no one was killed, thanks to the actions of the railroaders involved. The cause of the wreck was found not to have been the same problem with the angle-cock that had closed in Rhode Island, but a condition caused by the recoupling in Baltimore.

With the inauguration just days away and with thousands of visitors scheduled to arrive, the station had to be repaired immediately. By 7:00 a.m. the next day, the cars, which had fallen through the floor, had been removed. The GG1 was left in the baggage room, a temporary floor was built over the locomotive, and the station re-opened just three days after the accident.

After the inauguration, the GG1 was cut into three pieces and removed from the station's baggage room. The pieces were sent to the Altoona (Pa.) Shops of the PRR, to be rebuilt. When the work was complete 4876 was painted Tuscan red and returned to service and continued in use until 1985. It is shameful that a piece of Americana with such a history should be rusting away, but currently it is in a B&O storage yard not far from where this event occurred.



Today, 4876 rusts away in a Maryland train-yard.

A Wonderful Find !

By Judi Kearney

I found the most wonderful set of postcards recently. 12 cards – real photos – sequentially telling the story of the “Neptune Festival” or, as some may know it – “Crossing the Line.” Each card has a caption on the back, detailing the events of the day. They are dated 1921. I couldn’t resist!

What a hoot!

I had never heard of this ritual before, so I did some digging. Here’s what I found:

This ritual has its roots in Viking sailing ships. Early on, this ritual had a serious purpose: to test the novices in the crew to see if they could endure their first cruise at sea.

Today, this is more of a “fun fest,” with polliwogs being put to the test, to see if they are worthy to become shellbacks.

As a vessel draws close to the Equator, preparations for the Festival begin. The night before the “crossing,” **King Neptune** sends his messenger,

Davey Jones to inform the ship’s captain that he intends to board the ship and summon a list of polliwogs to appear before him. The actual ceremony revolves around the pretext of prepping the sailors (aka: polliwogs) for their audience before King Neptune. This preparation can be any number of dirty and disgusting actions – crawling through trash, eating colored food, and other such trials as the



Captain orders.



Davey Jones.
A member of the King’s court demands order.

After these rites of initiation, the “wogs” are shaved, and dunked in a tub of water, which is usually dyed



with some wild and crazy color. The Captain of the ship declares the men cleansed before King Neptune King Neptune, Queen Amphitrite and his court.

and his court, who then declares them worthy to be called trusty shellbacks. Each man receives an elaborate certificate, forever testifying to his safe passage across the equator.

I’ve found a few samples of these Certificates – the artwork is just beautiful.



Certificate Imperium Neptuni Regis



Attention readers. Stop here. You have read 5½ pages. I need your help. Get up, right now! Go find your postcard of Phar Lap, the Australian race horse.

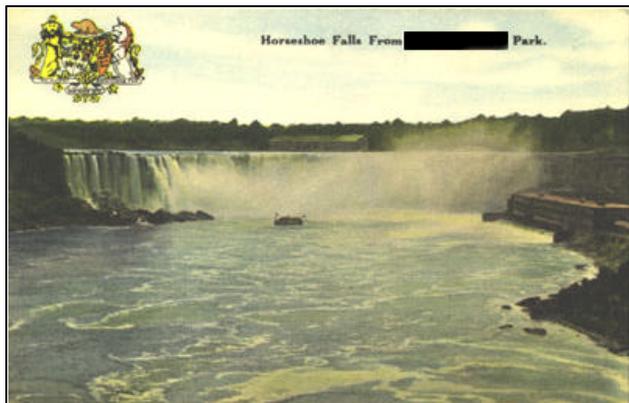


In the next issue . . .



The Page Seven Mystery Post Card

You Can Win This Post Card of the Horseshoe Falls in Niagara Falls, Ontario!



The Canadian part of the *Horseshoe Falls* is actually in a Canadian National Park. **Name the queen for whom the park is named.** Be the first to reply correctly and win.

Send your answer to the return address on this newsletter or email the editor: ray@rayhahn.com.

Note: this image has been electronically altered for the purpose of the contest, but the card you win is in near mint condition. Good Luck.



Desperately Seeking . . . Postcards!

by Bob Duerholz

You may remember that last summer I asked you to be watching for a set of French printed postcards by an artist named Plum. The cards pictured fashionable ladies wearing hats modeled after famous flyers of the day. At that time I thought the series was only four cards, but now I'm back to ask you to keep looking and to tell you that I have discovered a fifth, which most likely means there are even more than five.



The new card I've discovered is pictured here: it is named "Voisin Rougier" from the series, *Editions Artistique*, Paris, No. 114.

I would appreciate your help finding these cards.

Still Desperately Seeking . . . Postcards!

While you're searching for cards I want, would you please also look for this beautiful little Christmas postcard with Santa in a basket? It is copyright, 1913, by John Winsch.



Gustloff (cont.)



When the *Gustloff* was once more in full service, it soon became part of the largest planned naval evacuation in history.

As the *Gustloff* left the relative safety of the harbor at Gdynia on January 30th, 1945, the weather was very poor; the wind was strong, it was snowing, and ice flows were in the water. It was 10 degrees below zero, but, under its own power, the *Wilhelm Gustloff* began to punch its way through the

choppy, blustery Baltic Sea, unescorted, with its only protection being the few anti-aircraft guns it had to protect against air attacks. Against the threat of Soviet submarine attacks everyone knew she was defenseless but it was a risk they had to take.

At 9:08 p.m. a Soviet submarine commanded by Alexander Marinesko, hit the *Gustloff* with a spread of three torpedoes. The *Gustloff* immediately leaned to starboard. The immediate launch of rescue flares and the broadcast of an SOS enable several ships to respond. According to an eye-witness account by Karl Hoffman, the first torpedo struck the *Gustloff* at the bow, directly below the helm, deep under the waterline. The second torpedo exploded under the area of the ship that was the swimming pool, and the third hit amidships in the forward part of the engine room. That one ripped the ship's hull and shattered the machinery. Within minutes the forecandle was underwater, and the stern began to rise above the waterline. In less than an hour, the *Gustloff* was gone. Amazingly, 1,239 people were saved by other ships in the area.

According to the ship's official records, the list of passengers included a total of 6,050 people, but those records do not take into account those who made their way onto the decks of the *Gustloff* without official notice. In fact, new research suggests that the total number of passengers was actually 10,582.

When the *Gustloff* sank it was an event unlike any in naval history, if for no other reason than the sheer scale of the tragedy. Many ships have sunk with horrible loss of life, but never have so many lives been lost on a single ship. Like all tragedies, the suffering transcends time and place, all nationalities, and all borders – this tragedy was an unnecessary loss of human life that few know about.



The Mystery of the Amber Room

There is a sixty-year old mystery concerning a treasure from the Catherine Palace, in Pushkin, Russia. The room is a unique and priceless room of amber. To explain, it is necessary to look back nearly three centuries.

Amber, the fossil resin of now extinct coniferous trees, is found mainly along the Baltic coast of Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Russia, and one of the chief sources is a mine at Palmnicken, Germany. It was already being made into jewelry in the Bronze Age and both the Greeks and Romans prized it, using it for decoration.

In 1701, King Frederick I of Prussia decided to indulge his passion for amber and ordered a room in his castle to be paneled with amber. Completed in 1709 the decoration consisted of 175 square feet of amber paneling. The panels were set as polished mosaic and decorated with landscapes, coats of arms and monograms, shells and garlands. Spaced among them were smaller plates of amber inlaid with miniatures of extra-ordinary detail. To enhance the light reflection, silver foil was laid under the amber plates.

It was a beautiful piece of work which almost ruined the finances of the state of Prussia, but Frederick was proud of his room and showed it off proudly as a work of German ingenuity. Frederick's son and heir, Frederick William, virtual founder of the Prussian Army, cared little for amber and when Peter the Great of Russia visited him at his Potsdam palace in 1716 and admired the amber room, the Prussian king struck a bargain with him. He could have the amber in exchange for sixty tall members of the Tsar's Imperial Guard.

The amber panels were dismantled and taken to Peter's Winter Palace at St. Petersburg. After Peter's death his daughter, the fiercely anti-German Tsarina Elizabeth, had it moved to the summer palace at Tsarkoye Selo, in nearby Pushkin. At the Catherine Palace, because the room where Elizabeth wanted the panels installed was larger than the original room, she brought in the amber jeweler Martelli to fill in the gaps. He did brilliant work.

The finished room was of a stunning beauty. Teams of men were trained to clean and polish the panels and the room was known as the "poem in amber." After the revolution in 1917 the room was opened to the public and its fame spread world wide.

In 1941, with the Germans advancing on Leningrad, preparations were made to ship the amber to underground vaults in the Urals. But the Russians were too slow. They got two trainloads of treasures safely away but the Amber Room itself was not dismantled in time and it fell to the Germans, who had it shipped to Königsberg early in 1942 where it was set up and restored by Dr. Alfred Rohde, the world's leading authority on amber. German Command ordered that entry to the room be restricted. But one man who was allowed to see the room in the summer of 1943 reported: "The panels seemed in almost perfect condition. On entering, I was given a booklet which related

the long history of the Amber Room, claiming that it was, properly speaking, a German possession, now at last restored to its rightful owners."

By the end of 1943, RAF Bomber Command had started to pay attention to Königsberg. Rohde therefore dismantled the room and stored the panels in a cellar.

He regarded this as a temporary measure but eventually he was ordered to load the amber into twenty-four strongboxes suitable for "long transportation." In a note dated January 12, 1945, he wrote: "I am packing the Amber Study in boxes and other containers on the orders of the provincial custodian. As soon as this is

done, I shall evacuate the panels to Wechselburg."

The packing was completed on January 15th and the strongboxes were piled in the castle yard, and from that day all traces of the Amber Room have vanished.

The amber did not arrive in Wechselburg. Rohde and his wife died mysteriously in late 1945, leaving no indication of what happened to the amber. Some think that it was buried in the cellars of Königsberg Castle, or in a bunker which has now been built over. Others believe it is in a flooded salt mine near a German university town.

Dr. Georg Stein, who devotes himself to recovering treasures, is a supporter of the salt-mine theory. His evidence is a coded telex message sent to Berlin in January 1945 and signed 'Ringel, SS Group North-East, Königsberg, Prussia.' It says: "Amber Room, operation completed, object is stored in B. Sch. W.V." Stein thinks this refers to B Shaft at a salt mine twelve miles from Göttingen known as Wittekind Vollpriehausen – the W.V. of the coded telex. Nobody has been able to test his theory because the mine was flooded after an explosion in September 1945, when it was being used as a dump for unwanted ammunition by the British Army.

But there is another theory of the coded telex. "Sch." is not only short for shaft. It is also a commonly used abbreviation for "Schiffsraum," or hold. Therefore, accepting that there could have been a substitution of one letter, V for G, in the coding, the message could have meant: "Object is stored in B Hold on the Wilhelm Gustloff."

Nobody can prove that the Amber Room is at the bottom of the Baltic, nor can any of the other theories be proved. It is certain, however, that the last time the amber was seen was in the castle yard a few days before the Wilhelm Gustloff sailed.

The fate of the Amber Room remains a mystery.



Editor's Note:

In June 2002 Marie and I visited St. Petersburg, Russia. The city is filled with some of the most spectacular architecture in the world and there is more culture per square mile than anywhere we have been before. We know the Russians lived under an utterly brutal system of government for more than seventy years, but in spite of political leaders, the likes of Stalin and Khrushchev, the glory of a wonderful culture and an amazing society survived the turmoil of politics. During our visit we went to see the replica of the Amber Room. Without doubt, it may be a wonder of the modern world.