

This Month in Moravian History

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The Irene in Peril at Sea

On August 20, 1750, the Moravian ship Irene set sail from New York for Europe. On board were Captain Nicholas Garrison and his wife, Mariane, a crew consisting of several Moravian sailors, and the following passengers from Bethlehem: Laurentius Nyberg and his wife Patty, Nathanael Seidel, David Zeisberger, and Christian Bömber. Also on board were animals, including a young bear (referred to as a "mokus"), caught in Gnadenhütten. A month after its departure the Irene encountered a terrible storm that nearly caused the ship to sink. This is an eye-witness account, written by Br. Nyberg:

"... the next morning [Sept. 21], being a Sunday, at 6 o'clock the wind sprung up from North East so violently that the sailors hardly got in the sails before a hurricane blew so hard that we could no more run before the wind, the vessel not obeying the helm anymore. In the meantime the tempest increased and the rain drops cut the sailors skin like sharp pins. The waves soon grew to mountains and though it was day, the air was as thick and dark as the night. I peeped out several times but soon got enough. The sea washing over the ship forced us to retire to our holes at nine.

"Nicholas Garrison and John Vanderbilt climbed up and cut down the main top galant mast and, wonder indeed, that they came down alive. Soon after one of our horses fell down, being most killed by the impetuosity of the storm and was thrown over board. About eleven the last horse stooped into the deep also but returned again to the ship and had his feet on the gunwale, the ship laying on one side. It was a pity indeed to see the poor creature in that condition.

"About this time all our fowls, about 70 in number, were gone and only some pigs, two geese and mokus (a young bear) left alive. After twelve the Captain came down in great consternation, flung himself on his bed, saying 'Now let the Lamb be Captain.' Nathanael looked out once more, and said: 'Dear hearts, I believe the Lamb will now fetch us this moment.' My Patty sat on the other side of the cabin in her bed and did not hear this but spoke comfort to the boys and [to] Christian Bömper who howled most dreadfully. I called to my Patty and asked whether she was ready for going. She said: 'Yes, but I don't believe we shall go yet.'

"Nicholas came down most spent so we seated ourselves in one row: Captain on his bed, his wife, my wife, I, David, Nathanael and Nicholas, being determined to go hand in hand to our Savior. We only wished that our dear hearts in Bethlehem knew of our circumstances.



"I cannot enough thank the Lamb for that calmness and sereness [serenity] of mind He gave me in those junctures. At one o'clock we heard a violent crack as if we had struck on a rock and made the vessel tremble like a leaf for two minutes. Just then it was the bowsprit broke near to the ship. The forestag [foresail] then having lost its hold, the foremast broke 7 or 8 foot above the deck and falling down broke the foreyard. In the same moment down tumbles the main top mast (the main top galant most being before cut down) and broke in its fall both the main and main top sail yards to pieces and so the whole bunch hanging on shrouds fell overboard and a miracle it was that it did not upset the vessel, such a weight hanging on one side and the storm driving so violently on the other. Then it was resolved to cut the shrouds and let the broken masts and yards drive but the sea made it almost impracticable, till Br. Schouten got a line, twisted twice round Br. Jacobson (that dear man) and held one end and another sailor the other end and so Jacobson swimming to and fro on the deck with the ax in his hand and rope around him, cut the shrouds and so the ship was made lighter and rose a little again

to the great joy of our cabin company that sat all this while waiting what would be the end. The masts being gone and the poor ship left to the discretion of an enraged sea rocked so violently that everything in the cabin turned upside down. The storm still increasing till towards ten o'clock the following day. When it grew more moderate so that one could look out again, such a sight I never saw: like a burned-down castle only some stumps of masts standing, the shrouds cut and part of the sails, all our fowls dead and horses gone. There we drove like Noah's Ark in a very pitiful condition."

Abridged, spelling modernized. (BethCong 266). Image: the Irene at Sea by Benjamin Garrison (courtesy Unity Archives).

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