

THE RED STAR LINE

Introduction

There is no business than Sarasota business.

It's not from Irving Berlin, it's my own interpretation.

It is even not a quote, it is just what happened to me the previous years.

By the way, Irving Berlin is one of the many who came to the United States with the Red Star Line from Antwerp.

So, I am sincerely pleased to have been invited once again to Sarasota, a city which I am very fond of for many different reasons, both professional as private. I am even more moved because I found here a witness to a story that is very close to my heart. It is very close to my job as vice mayor for culture and tourism in the city of Antwerp as well. What I am referring to is the history of the Red Star Line shipping company and of immigration to the USA. We are opening a new museum on this topic next year in Antwerp: *the Red Star Line/People on the Move* museum.

“The fact that we got out of Germany and then out of Antwerp, in the very last year that Red Star Line was running ships from Antwerp to the United States, was overwhelming”

This is a quote from an interview we were able to make last year in Sarasota with Ms. Sonia Pressman Fuentes. Sonia and her parents and brother were among the many families that emigrated to the USA via Antwerp on a Red Star Line ship. They left the Old Continent to get away from the horror of the persecution of the Jews.

By the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, millions of Eastern European Jews had already left for the New World. The Jewish-American writer Yuri Suhl mentions the central role played by Antwerp in this historical mass migration. In the opening sentence of his autobiographical novel *“One foot in America”*, he writes: *“When we arrived in Antwerp, my father heaved a deep sigh and said, ‘Now, thank God, we are with one foot in America’. Next stop is New York.”*

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A hundred years ago, two Red Star Line ships left the port of Antwerp every week for the USA, with on board an average of between 1000 and 1500 migrants. Altogether, the Red Star Line is thought to have transported over two million people to the New World. Many of them were Eastern European Jews.

Today, I am going to focus on the history of the Red Star Line shipping company and Jewish immigrants, and look in greater detail into the particular story of the Pressman family.

Red Star Line

Twinkle, twinkle, the Red Star/ How I wonder what you are. We, citizens of Antwerp, have just started to wonder what great history the Red Star Company carries in itself and how it contributed to our past.

The history of the Red Star Line, the legendary shipping company with the star of that color in its flag, is fascinating. It is part of Antwerp's collective memory.

The Red Star Line was active between 1873 and 1934, a period of economic internationalization for goods, services, transport and work. International concerns saw the light of day. Tons of goods were shipped from one continent to another and 55 million people left Europe for the New World.

The ships of the Red Star Line played a significant role in this story. The ships that docked on the *Rijnkaai* became an icon of Antwerp.

The Red Star Line was above all a story of people. First of all, of the migrants, men, women and children, often associated with poverty and misery, but also with hope. Rich passengers too, from business folk to crowned heads, undertook the crossing to America with much pleasure. In time, the ships would offer their first-class passengers the comfort of a floating five-star hotel.

In the background of this human story of love and suffering, raged the tough competition between shipping lines and between ports of emigration, as well as the political lobbying on the part of the private companies.

History of the Red Star Line company

'The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there' wrote J.B. Priestley. We have started to rediscover this past and especially that part of our past dealing with thousands of people longing for a new country...

It started with the *The Société Anonyme de Navigation Belgo-Américaine*, as the Belgian-American shipping company was officially called. The founding initiative had been taken by Clement Acton Griscom of Philadelphia, who was involved with the Pennsylvania Railroad company.

He selected Antwerp as home port because of its central location in Europe and its excellent train connections, and also because he had contacts among Belgian shipping agents. The shipping company sailed under the Belgian flag, which meant it could get around the requirement of having to hire American staff at much higher wages. The Belgian government, hoped to breathe new life into migrant traffic via Antwerp after a period of stagnation. They granted the new company a monopoly on postal traffic and offered subsidies as well. The City of Antwerp waived the wharf and hangar fees.

On 20 January 1873, the first ship with a red star on its smokestack, from which the company derived its name, departed from Antwerp. The *Vaderland* offered cabins for 70 first-class and 800 third-class passengers.

The economic crisis of the mid-1870s made for a difficult few years at first. But when the market recovered toward the end of the decade, the fleet was expanded with the addition of the *Rusland*, *Rhijnland*, *Waesland*, *Zeeland*, *Westernland* and *Belgenland*, which were already twice the size of the pioneer ships. As a result, a weekly service was offered to New York, and a service once every two weeks to Philadelphia. In spite of a growing number of passengers, the Red Star Line had to wrestle tough competition from shipping companies in neighboring ports.

In order to survive this competition, the companies began to look into the possibility of cooperation. The largest continental companies, i.e. the Holland America Line (HAL), the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique (CGT), the Norddeutsche Lloyd (NDL), the HAPAG and the Red Star Line followed the example of the British companies and formed a cartel. This led to price agreements and agreements established to control the network of agents. Over time, the companies imposed quotas among themselves and forced the British lines to join the cartel. They also made agreements with the cartels that controlled the British-Scandinavian and Mediterranean markets.

Initially, the migrants traveled in dire conditions, with hundreds of people in steerage. But the steam shipping companies increased efforts to guarantee comfort during the crossing. Since the race for ever larger and faster ships continued as never before, more and more cabins could be filled. The *Vaderland*, the Red Star Line's first ship, had a capacity of 2748 tons, and room for 70 first-class and

800 third-class passengers. Forty years later, when it ordered the *Belgenland II*, this capacity had been multiplied by ten as the ship offered 600 first-class, 350 second-class and 2000 third-class berths.

As of 1902, Belgian shareholders began to bow out, turning the Red Star Line into a purely American company. Nevertheless, the Red Star Line ships continued to sail under the Belgian flag in view of the many facilities this provided.

In comparison with the French, German and English companies, the Red Star Line and the Holland America Line (which served Rotterdam) remained relatively small. With their limited fleet they weren't able to cover the Mediterranean market. They depended on the stream of Eastern European migrants who had to cross Germany before reaching Antwerp or Rotterdam. Bremen and Hamburg remained the largest emigrant ports by far.

The outbreak of World War I threw the migrant trade into disarray. After the war, a reading test and quotas for each nationality were introduced. This marked the end of the unfettered transportation of people between Europe and America. Gradually, the growing tourist sector became the main source of income. The *Belgenland II* became a cruise ship offering exclusive trips around the world (133 days from America) with the slogan "*Don't stay at home in the winter, come with us to the sun*". Still, the tourist trade could not make up for the sharply reduced migrant transportation.

The 1929 Wall Street crash marked the beginning of the end. With his New Deal, President Roosevelt tried to breathe new life into, among other things, the American fleet. American investors took advantage of the possibility of liquidating shipping companies which were operating at a loss and investing their capital in their own country. In 1934, two Red Star Line ships plus the company name were sold to Arnold Bernstein, who kept operating between Antwerp and New York. The German company used the ships primarily to transport tourists and assembled cars. At the same time there was an increase in the number of Jewish passengers fleeing persecution in Nazi Germany. Even Bernstein himself was not exempt from persecution. He was thrown into prison and his shipping company was confiscated. He was released right before the outbreak of World War II and left for New York.

The Red Star Line ships ended up, by way of the German authorities, in the hands of eternal rival Holland America Line. After World War II, airliners gradually became the preferred way to travel

across the Atlantic. From then on, the Red Star Line would be but a memory. But a memory that lives on in dozens of preserved accounts from Red Star Line passengers in America and Canada.

Passengers

Golda Meir once wrote that *we are alle passengers of history*. I couldn't agree more. She knew what she wrote as she was once a passenger of the Red Star Line. Moreover, the crucial role it played as hub for migration, turned Antwerp into an even more international city as it was already before. It's no coincidence that it has been referred to as the Manhattan of the sixteenth century. It's no coincidence that it is nowadays a vibrant city with about 168 different nationalities, the second highest number in Europe after Amsterdam.

Red Star Line passengers hailed from all countries and regions of Europe. The first big wave of migration was primarily Anglo-Saxon, Germanic and Scandinavian. Antwerp was a port of departure mainly for German nationals, but also and to a lesser extent Swiss, Belgian and Dutch nationals. In the 1880s migration fever began to spread to Eastern and Southern Europe. By the turn of the century the migrants from these regions outnumbered all others.

After 1890, travelers to the new world were mainly from the Austrian-Hungarian dual monarchy and Czarist Russia. Russian transmigration began to increase after 1895. When they were able to go legally, the migrants left with their Russian passport and the tickets they had been sent from the US. But the majority of the Jews left Russia illegally, however, aided by instructions from experts or with the help of professional people smugglers.

Not until the 1890s was the Jewish minority in Russia officially encouraged to emigrate to the West. The expulsion of Jews from Moscow in 1891 was a significant turning point in this regard. In 1902, 15,726 passengers from Russia embarked, twice the number of the year before. The emigration wave began to swell after the general mobilization during the Russian-Japanese war (1904) and the revolutionary years that followed.

1906 was a high point with 35,724 people, and after a short dip the upward trend remained through 1913, when almost 50,000 Russians, most of them Jews, departed for the new world from Antwerp. After the First World War, a new emigration movement started in Eastern Europe. The Russian Civil War, the disputes regarding the borders following the collapse of the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy

and, above all, the war between the Soviet Union and Poland drove thousands of people to flee. A rush of Jewish migrants arrived in Antwerp. On 17 March 1921, a Red Star Line ship, the *Samland*, left Danzig with 680 passengers on board. 539 of them declared they were Jewish, i.e. almost 80% of the passengers.

The Jewish community mobilized *en masse* to offer fellow Jews in the main transfer cities logistic and financial support. Jews who settled in Antwerp found themselves in a close-knit social and religious Jewish network with numerous thriving organizations.

In Antwerp, migrants were assisted by the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, the *Comité de Secours aux Israélites expulsés de Russie*. Many migrants, especially Russian and Polish Jews, got stranded in Antwerp because they didn't pass the Red Star Line medical inspection or because they didn't have enough money. They often found jobs in the emerging diamond sector. The fact that many Jewish Russian migrants settled in Antwerp is borne out by a Yiddish magazine published in Saint Petersburg in 1912. In an article, candidate migrants are warned that they should not spend their travel money for their ship ticket in Antwerp because work is not always available and some migrants end up begging.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that traces of Antwerp can be found in Yiddish literature. In her autobiographical novel, *Der sheydim tants* (The Devil's Dance), Ester Kreitman, née Hinde Ester Singer, the older sister of Bashevis Singer, relates the autobiographical story of a Jewish Polish girl on the eve of World War II who marries a diamond cutter working in Antwerp named Avrom Kreitman. Kreitman himself had fled Poland to avoid military conscription. (Cf. Clifford, Dafna. "From Diamond Cutters to Dog Races: Antwerp and London in the Work of Esther Kreitman", *Prooftexts* 23 (2003): 320-37). Sholem Aleichem wrote in his novel *Motl, Peysi the Cantor's Son*: "*Whoever you meet is either a cutter, a grinder or a polisher. Many youngsters from our gang have stayed behind to become cutters.*"

By the late nineteenth century, Antwerp had a thriving Jewish community of Russian-Jewish immigrants who observed the rules of Orthodox Judaism. A shtetl with shops and prayer houses had developed in the streets around Central Station. According to Aleichem: "*... in other cities all the people were Germans, and here in Antwerp we are among our own people. You can even hear a Yiddish word.*" The Jewish community grew from 1,200 members around 1880 to 35,000 in 1939. Nowadays Antwerp is still one of the few cities where you can hear Yiddish spoken on the street

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Last year, in Florida, at Pompano Beach Miami to be precise, we met Mr. Morris Moel. He is a retired radiologist whose life story is a good example of the odyssey that a Jewish family could go on. The family lived in a shtetl in the Ukraine, that the father left in 1913 for the USA. The family lost all contact during WWI. In 1922, Father Moel sent money to Warsaw with the help of the HIAS. At that time, armed conflict between Poland and the Soviet Union was raging, and the family was living in poverty and the violence of war. Mother Moel went to Warsaw on her own and only managed to have her children brought over four months later. They crossed the border on a sledge. In Warsaw, they had to wait for months again for a visa, while two of the children were diagnosed with trachoma, an eye infection.

Finally, they were able to leave, and they proceeded with the train to Antwerp, where they were able to board the *S.S. Lapland*. But their troubles were not over yet. On Ellis Island, his little sister Edith was rejected because of trachoma and the family had to take the difficult decision of having her returned to Antwerp on her own, where she ended up living in various institutions. A second attempt was made for her to be accepted in the US, but it failed and she was returned to Antwerp once again. The family was only finally reunited after ten years.

In the meantime, young Moishe was rechristened Morris. He successfully studied medicine and became Head Radiologist at Mount Sinai Hospital in Chicago.

Some of the passengers who left for the New World via Antwerp went on to become world famous in the areas of politics, music, and even ... nuclear submarines. In 1906 eight-year old Golda Mabovitz (the future Israeli premier Golda Meir) traveled with her mother and little sister from Kiev in the Ukraine via Antwerp to Milwaukee in the US, where her father had settled.

That same year, the wife and children of Abraham Rikover, a Jewish tailor, would take the Red Star Line to America to join their father. One of the children, Chaim Rikover, went on to gain fame as Admiral Hyman Rickover, an illustrious figure in American military history who, because of his design for the first nuclear submarine, is called the father of the nuclear fleet.

In 1893 the *SS Rhyndland*, arrives in New York. On board are Jewish cantor Moses Baline with his wife and eight children. The family is from Russia. Their youngest son is five-year old Israel. This boy went on, as Irving Berlin, to become one of the most famous American songwriters with popular songs such as Always, Cheek to cheek, White Christmas, There's no Business Like Show Business, etc. His musicals played on Broadway and were made into Hollywood films.

Thirty years after he crossed the Atlantic on the lower deck of the Rhyndland, the orchestra in the upscale salons of the Belgenland would play his compositions.

One of the most famous Red Star Line passengers was undoubtedly Albert Einstein. When Hitler seized power in Germany on 23 March 1933, Albert Einstein and his wife Elza Koch were on their way home from the United States. He was on the freight ship *Belgenland* when he received the news that the Nazis had confiscated all his possessions. The *Belgenland* moored in Antwerp on Tuesday 28 March 1933. Einstein, greeted by the city council and the press, announced that he would not continue on to Germany. He traveled to the Belgian coast, where he stayed for several months. In September his wife Elza left with the *S.S. Westenland* from Antwerp. Albert Einstein joined her in Southampton. On 17 October 1933 they arrived in New York.

The Pressman Odyssey

Isaac Bashevis Singer, who was born in Warsaw and died in Florida, described perfectly the feelings of the migrants that decided to go to the United States. He wrote: *between hope and fear there were two lines. One was called courage and the other one common sense. The first line was translated into german as death. The second one into english as emigration.*

The quote is applicable to what happened with the Pressmann family. In 1933, they fled Berlin and sought refuge in Antwerp. Zysia Pressman, his wife Hinda, and their two children Hermann and Sulamith (Sonia) lived in Germany. The Pressmans originally came from Poland and had built up a flourishing confection business in Berlin. When Hitler came to power, Herrmann Pressman, then aged eighteen, decided to flee the regime. On 9 May 1933, he left for Antwerp, where he stayed with a cousin who ran a shoe repair business. After much trouble, he was able to convince his parents to also come to Antwerp. The family settled in Antwerp, and five-year-old Sonia went to kindergarten there.

Attempts to set up a new business in Antwerp led to nothing. Furthermore, the Belgian authorities were far from pleased with the arrival of Jewish refugees in the country. German refugees were still allowed in but Jews of Polish origin were not granted residence or work permits. Hermann's repeated attempts to obtain a permanent residence permit for his family were unsuccessful and

even the intervention of the Mayor, Camille Huysmans, did not work. Belgium's Public Safety Service made the Pressmans leave the country.

Since they had enough financial resources, they were able to get hold of a visa for the USA. On 20 April 1934, they boarded the Red Star Line's *SS Westernland* with New York as their destination. This was the same ship with which Einstein had left six months previously.

As you all know, Sonia became a prominent feminist in the US and she wrote a gripping account of her experiences as a migrant and as a feminist. *Eat First - You Don't Know What They'll Give You, The Adventures of an Immigrant Family and Their Feminist Daughter*. For her autobiography she was able to use her brother Hermann's diary, that he had kept during his stay in Antwerp.

It is a fun account of the daily life of a young Jewish man in Antwerp, of his circle of friends, and the nightlife but also of his ceaseless attempts to try and get a residence permit. He describes the unpleasant medical check-up he had to undergo before being able to leave with the Red Star Line and the constant fear of being turned back nevertheless.

This diary, that Ms. Pressman lent us, gave us the idea of searching in the Belgian. We found the full file on the Pressman family in the State Archives in Brussels. Thanks to this file, with its many passport photos, we were able to reconstruct and document the life of the Pressmans in Belgium. The story of the Pressman family is invaluable for our museum because it clearly shows how tragic events of the world's history and personal experiences can come together thanks to a Red Star Line story.

Red Star Line Museum project

Nothing is so important for the future of mankind than invest in the remembrance of our past.

So we did. In 2004, the City of Antwerp decided to purchase the Red Star Line buildings. In this complex, third-class passengers had to undergo a medical and administrative check-up and take a shower while their luggage was disinfected in large steam boilers. These buildings are now listed as monuments protected by the Flemish Community. We took this decision not only to save a historic but also to bring to life the story of historical and current migration movements.

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The buildings are currently being restored, and in the spring of 2013, the museum will open its doors. We have commissioned the American architectural firm of Beyer Blinder Belle and the Belgian consultancy firm Arcade to restore the Red Star Line site and to design the museum. Beyer Blinder Belle was also responsible for the renovation of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York. We will maintain and restore these historic building with a view to turning them into a contemporary museum on migration and the Red Star Line.

The Red Star Line Museum will present a unique historic and local version of a universal story. It's a story about ships, but more importantly, it's a story about people. The Museum will bear witness to a unique period of mass migration from Europe to the New World. It will make the hopes of those who left come to life. It will also link their stories to a wider world of people on the move, and thus reconnect the past and the present. International tourists, American descendants of Red Star Line passengers, and various local communities and age groups will be invited to reflect on their own and other people's experiences with migration. The Jewish exodus from Europe will play an important role in the museum story.

Do you know this girl ?

A few weeks ago we launched in Philadelphia the *Do you know this girl* campaign. Searching for an icon of those millions of unknown passengers, we came across an iconic picture of a young emigrant girl waiting on a bench, holding a Red Star-ticket in her hands and staring in the lens of the photographer. The girl on the picture is emblematic for all those who sought in their own way the American Dream. *Young Galician immigrant holding envelope labelled RSL, Saint John, May 1905* – that is the description of the photo and the only clue we came across in National Library and Archives of Canada.

To honour the unknown emigrant we launch an international search for the identity of the girl. The American journalist Gretchen Kelly will be our guide. She is the granddaughter of a RSL-passenger that came from Austria to Antwerp to cross the Atlantic. From June till October 2011 she will share all her experiences with her followers on Twitter, Facebook and the readers of her blog via www.redstarline.org.

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Those who help us in our search will be rewarded. You can win a trip to Antwerp for two persons, offered by the Flander Tourist Office New York and the Red Star Line Museum. And of course you will attend the pre-opening of the museum in 2012.

Ladies and gentlemen, not so long ago sir Richard Rogers built a new big building for the city of Antwerp. The renowned dutch architect Neutelings was there a few weeks ago when he saw how his concept of a 'tower of stories' was realised as the new MAS museum for the city. In a few years we will have the new headquarters of our port, one of the biggest in the world, created by Zaha Hadid. In between we will have the opening of the Red Star Line Museum, renovated by Beyer, Blinder & Belle from New York.

Cities like Antwerp are in a way cities on the move. They are passengers between their plans and the expectations of their own people, they transform the questions of tomorrow in the answers of today. If we really want to do that, it can only done by learning from the past. Red Star Line is an important piece of that past. We transform our past and present in buildings for the future and architecture is a reality check of our dreams.

Do you know this girl? I can already give you a hint: she is a symbol of my city. She was a passenger between her own reality and her own expectations from life

Ladies and gentlemen, we could learn a lot of our ancestors. We could learn a lot op people on the move. Some of this migration spirit transforms itself it in entrepreneurship. Seth Godin, one of America's most famous marketers, captures this spirit perfectly when he said during his presentation last year in Antwerp: *"Opportunities are there to be created. Entrepreneurship is not like sailing – if there is no wind, just blow"*.

I thank you for your attention and I invite you to the opening of the Red Star Line Museum in the spring of 2013.

Philip Heylen