

## Iceberg first – the sinking of the *Titanic* covered by the German press April 1912

As *Titanic* literature is American dominated, the best known contemporary reports are those of the *New York Times* and a few weekly magazines that were published in the USA. In the 1990s, Great Britain saw two books dealing with how the British press covered the sinking of the *Titanic* whereas German newspaper reports have been of no interest at all to *Titanic* historians or researchers – with just one exception: The authors Harro Hess and Manfred Hessel quoted a few of them in their book *Zwei Gesichter einer Katastrophe* (published in the German Democratic Republic in 1989 before the reunion) and *Titanic. Das Handbuch* (published 1998).

When examining the German press of April 1912 especially regarding the sinking of the *Titanic*, the following points start to uncover:

- the political news are not that different to today's
- there were other topics besides the *Titanic*
- the *Titanic* disaster was dealt with just like today's newspaper deal with disasters; however, they had less photographs in those days.

The first reports on the sinking of the *Titanic* chiefly show desinformation. After that, the good news spread and eventually the bad news including the sinking and the great loss of life follows – the difference in time between the USA and the German Empire can clearly be noted. But it is surprising to see how fast news spread already in those days.

The first news that contain that the *Titanic* is either steaming to Halifax or being towed by the *Virginian* are interpreted by the reporter as he stated that if the *Titanic* runs under her own steam her engines must be alright.

There are of course speculations how the accident could have happened. It is assumed that it might have been foggy but everybody believes it must have happened in a gale – the picture everybody had in his/her head can be clearly seen: Ships are only wrecked in a gale. Nobody would have believed a ship being wrecked in a clear night under a starry sky.

This picture is still being forwarded after the news that the *Titanic* had sunk leaked through. As the *Carpathia* did not give any details on how the accident happened, the reporters continued to guess. And they guessed that the *Titanic* capsized. Today, the sinking of the *Titanic* is the perfect picture for a sinking at least in our mind. But in those days, it simply was not!

The newspaper are rather quick in asking experts on two topics, even as everybody still believed the *Titanic* on her way to Halifax with all her passengers being safe on another ship (the newspapers created a perfect picture of a ship in distress being aided by several other ships standing by): Firstly, they have somebody telling what icebergs are and of what they consist; secondly, at least the *Hamburger Nachrichten* have a nautical expert telling what to do if an iceberg is sighted. This expert stated clearly: If you sight an iceberg, reverse your

engines and return on the same way you approached it just to get back in waters you know to be safe and to avoid any collision with the hidden underwater parts of the berg.

Further speculations are concerning the master. It is generally believed that he had been on the bridge as reports of other ships show that *Titanic's* course led directly through an icefield. This is also the point when a translation error crept in: English newspapers reported on the large dimensions of the ice **field**, German newspapers make it to the large dimensions of the ice**berg**.

Right from the beginning, the newspapers comment on the fact that the accident had nothing to do with the size of the ship. What might seem rather odd today, had a real background: Blohm & Voss was building the *Imperator* that was even larger than the *Titanic*. Obviously there had been many critics on this enormous size and it might have been feared that nobody was able to navigate these vessels safely.

As it became clear that the *Titanic* had sunk and many people lost their lives in the disaster, German newspapers attacked the White Star Line and accused them of holding back the truth. They wrote that had been a "bad tactic". Other voices are less heated. Take for example Albert Ballin, this well-known and highly regarded chairman of the Hamburg-Amerika-Linie. He stated publicly that prime goal should not be to provide more lifesaving equipment (that would mean remedying the result) but to provide the best possible safety on shipboard to prevent accidents at all (that would mean remedying the causes). Any careful observer of today notices that already then the public cried for remedying the result (which is always the more obvious) instead of preferring to cure the causes (which usually is far more effective).

Already then, it was reported for the first time that Captain Smith was going to take the speed record – he had to restore his reputation after colliding with the *Hawke*. And even though all reports state that nobody has any detailed information, the newspapers nevertheless contain stories about how the collision and the sinking took place. However, they are also blaming Ismay for the *Carpathia* neither replying to inquiries nor taking private telegrams nor giving any information besides transmitting the list of the survivors. It obviously was not considered as important to have the names of the survivors transmitted first when they smelled a good story. The relatives in those days were also not interested in getting to know the names of the survivors – they wanted their own telegram to be taken by the *Carpathia* and replied. It seems the people in those days were as impatient as egoistic as we are said to be.

In conjunction with the accusation of Ismay without any shadow of proof there are also accusations against the *Carpathia* and her master for her silence and for not replying to any inquiry – the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* even stated that the Senate of the United State ordered a committee to find out why this was done hence upon their arrival Ismay as well as the master of the *Carpathia* were expected to take stand.

An often repeated story is the one that the *Virginian* had taken the survivors and later transferred them to the *Carpathia* as the latter was on her way towards New York whereas the *Virginian* was enroute to Europe. It took some time until the truth was known and somehow naturally the newspapers then reported that the survivors had to wait for hours in the cold and on the stormy sea until the *Carpathia* was able to take them aboard.

Other interesting parts of those early newspaper reports:

- the *Hamburger Nachrichten* published the German translation of at least a part of Cape Race's procès-verbal. Definitely a good effort that you would not expect today.
- those newspapers close to the Kaiser described the interior of the *Titanic* in a very exaggerated way as soon as they knew the ship had sunk. It seems as if they wanted to show that British splendour and show-off is due to sink – hence it would be the first time that the sinking of the *Titanic* was used for anti-British-propaganda.
- in the rush for news, there was the funny report that the *Titanic* had sunk "iceberg first". The English original stated "bow first" of course, but this translation error simply shows the rush with which those reports were translated and printed.
- some newspapers comment critically on reports they do not rely in but nevertheless feel they have to repeat them as they considered it to be part of their duty.

And it were the *Hamburger Nachrichten* once more who came up with a special effort: They wrote that the *Carpathia* took *Titanic's* lifeboats some 30 miles away from *Titanic's* transmitted distress position. Whoever wrote that report, drew the following conclusion: The boats were lowered where the collision had taken place, but then the *Titanic* gained speed again and the boats were unable to follow her. Obviously, the message that the *Titanic* was said to have been on her way to Halifax has been connected with the fact that the lifeboats were not at the distress position. So already in 1912 somebody was puzzled how it came that the position in which the lifeboats were found and the transmitted distress position were not nearly identical.

In 1912, this puzzle was solved rather easily: The *Titanic* never moved after the collision, and as the transmitted distress position had been correct according to Boxhall and Rostron, the *Carpathia* had been faster than ever before and ever after, she was said to have made 17 knots instead of her regular maximum speed of 14 knots. That of course also explained for the earlier arrival at the lifeboats.

Only in 1985 when the wreck was found it came to light that the transmitted distress position must have been wrong. Thus the *Carpathia* never exceeded her 14 knots maximum speed. – Nevertheless it is fascinating that somebody noticed already in 1912 that the transmitted distress position was far away from the position in which the *Carpathia* found the lifeboats.

Although German newspaper reports do not play a major part in *Titanic* literature, they do make an interesting reading and sometimes raise topics which have been forgotten long since. They possibly leave a field to be researched by careful researchers and make another part of *Titanic* history accessible for a broader range of people.

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