

Adolescence years on the Kungsholm

By Hans 'Hasse' Gustafsson

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Fifty years ago a visit to the most exotic places on this planet was clearly unattainable for 99.99 % of all Swedes. Many of us had seen the popular television series “Villervalle in the South Seas”, launched in 1963, about a young Swedish boy who went to the French Polynesia with his father and family on a United Nations’ health inspection assignment, where he got involved in many exciting tropical adventures. To travel there oneself some day, remained but a remote and impossible wish for most Swedish youngsters – with exception, of course – of those who got jobs at sea after school and especially the lucky handful that could join the White Viking Fleet to work on the luxury liners Stockholm, Gripsholm and Kungsholm!

I was one of them 1971–73, with a comeback onboard in 1975. The Kungsholm was my home and my castle during some formidable years of my earliest adulthood.

In the following I will recapitulate some experiences from my career and work onboard, starting literally from the very bottom of the ship and advancing up to the passenger areas located on the top decks. I will recall how my daily duties were organized and I will highlight some aspects of crew life on the ship almost half a century ago. These are my personal memories. Should anyone feel offended or if some details are wrong I will only be pleased to make the appropriate corrections. I would like to thank my former shipmate and old friend Tommy Stark for frank and useful feedback on early versions of the manuscript, and I owe Sten Hovne among others for reminding me about some long forgotten details. Here’s my story:

Getting there

My first job application was refused by SAL’s Gothenburg office as I was too young then, only 17, doing my final year in senior high school. But the following year I was accepted, and I got hired as a kitchen hand with a very modest monthly salary of 807 Swedish Crowns (today equivalent to 118 US dollars), boarding and meals included. Thus, on June 28 1971 I mustered aboard the dazzling white ship in Gothenburg, bound for a North Cape cruise. My heartbeat was high of excitement as I crossed the crew gangway! Before embarking I had heard rumours about a wild gay population onboard and, yes, I must admit that I was a little bit concerned since I wasn’t yet able to tell who was and who wasn’t.... But again – why worry? At the age of 18, the grandest adventure in my life was about to begin.

Starting at the bottom

A kitchen hand could end up working almost anywhere in the food chain onboard, from foodstuff handling to waste disposal. Newcomers were often deployed to the central dish wash where many hands were constantly needed. The dish wash on A-deck was a messy and noisy place embedded in loud clatter and a 24-hour odor due to the most

unimaginable mix of scrap food residues and organic waste that this luxury vessel produced, every day, 365 days of the year. And the stench in the dump room, located between the central kitchen and the dish wash, was the worst! This was where all the garbage accumulated in barrels and plastic bags awaiting permission from the Bridge to be thrown overboard – nighttime only so passengers wouldn't notice, and always far out at sea in order to make sure that the garbage would sink before reaching any shore. When cruising close to land several days in a row, for example along the Norwegian coastline, the Kungsholm would now and then make special detours out to the open sea at night just to dump its garbage. And she was not alone: it was common practice by all shipping companies to do so in those days.

Luckily, I was fortunate enough to start off as a potato peeler (!). We were two full-time potato peelers onboard. Located in one of the most remote and murky corners of the starboard forward C-deck, without any porthole for day light, Morgan Johansson from Säfte and myself peeled, cut and shaped potatoes for 800–1000 persons each day. Although we had machines to do the rough peeling we had to check and finish each potato by hand – a time consuming, wet and soggy task. The bulk was simply peeled potatoes for boiling, but some dishes required 80 liters of perfectly square-cut potato pieces, others needed 30 liters of small and perfectly round potato balls “*pomme parisienne*” to be carved out of a big potato with a special knife – a real handicraft. And each time our fingers became sore and callused. Another piece of art was the occasional orders for “*Pont Neuf*” – rectangular pieces of potatoes each of which were to be cut and meticulously shaped like a small canoe at both ends. We got daily instructions and supervision from a German potato cook, Albrecht. There were at least 20 specialty cooks onboard – one or two dedicated for each dish: potatoes, sauces, fish, meat, poultry, vegetables, soups, pancakes, eggs, etc, etc. The majority of the cooks on the Kungsholm were of German, Austrian and Swiss origin.

The potatoes we used were four–five times bigger than the biggest variety I had ever seen in Sweden. They came in large jute sacks marked “Idaho”, and stocks onboard were replenished each time we docked in New York. The potato stock was kept in a huge cold store next door to the potato peeler room. It contained, literally speaking, a mountain of bagged potatoes and vegetables – enough to last for a long cruise.

A really good thing was that Morgan and I could peel potatoes in advance while at sea, day and night if we wanted to, in order to have lots of time off in the ports. Others envied us for that! We just kept the ready peeled and shaped potatoes in big stainless steel casks filled with cold water inside the cold store, changing with fresh cold water every day to prevent the potatoes from going sour. Sometimes we could take 2–3 days off, just going back briefly to change the water. Among my top memories from that time is sleeping out on the beach on a SAL-towel under a starlit night sky in the Bermudas, after joining in at an improvised beach party with some locals. It got late, many beers, and eventually we decided not to venture back to the ship until next morning. So we slept in the open. Morgan Johansson, Tommy Stark and some other young Swedes from the ship were there too. I was nineteen of age, and I had spotted my first live barracuda in the warm sea earlier that day! Morgan and I had peeled potatoes across the Atlantic, enough to last for days. But we forgot to go back and change the water this time, and the

potato cook was steaming furious when we returned to the ship.... To save his own skin he had had to change the water himself! Morgan and I learned the lesson...

Next, the bars and the lounges

In September 1971, after three months onboard – and a few hundred thousand potatoes later, I was offered a promotion by my superior boss, the Chef de Cuisine. I could now become a bar boy (“barnisse”) in the Forward Bar on the Verandah deck. It was an offer I could not refuse, although it meant a salary reduction of 10 per cent to just 730 Swedish Crowns (about 105 US dollars) per month! However, I was told that tips from passengers would make up for more than the difference. And indeed, it did!

From that day, an exciting new world opened up as I was now permitted to move around more or less freely between the passenger areas where I worked. I could watch the movements of the surrounding sea all day long, follow the weather changes and appreciate the sight of distant shores of foreign land while working. And I could also speak with the passengers.

What a change! What a tremendous upgrade from peeling potatoes! My work outfit was upgraded too, from a simple work jacket in shades of brown with cheap plastic buttons to the waiter’s starched and impeccably white uniform jacket with SAL silver buttons and blue flappers on the shoulders. A new chapter started, and it felt awesome!

At the same time I had to move into new quarters, from mid C–deck to the ship’s farthestmost aft cabin on the portside of C–deck – just a few meters above the heavy rudder gear and the ship’s rumbling propeller shaft. In bad weather the noise was unbearable as the screws would sometimes spin wildly in air pockets between the long waves before coming down again into the water with a massive thump followed by a rumble that would relocate and overthrow objects in the cabin as if it were an earthquake! We were four “nissar” living in that section of the ship during the final months of 1971: Tommy Stark from Stockholm and Bobby from Czechoslovakia shared the aft starboard side cabin, and Anders Nyhlén, also from Stockholm, and myself from Strängnäs, shared the one on the portside.

A bar boy’s duties

Most of the time I helped the bartenders filling up with bottles, ice, soda and lemons, etc, in the bar, and pressing fresh orange and lemon juice, and washing up glasses and stinking ash trays backstage in the bar pantry. During the evening cocktail hour, the bar boys offered ‘Hors d’Oeuvre’, i.e. hot and cold canapés/snacks, to the passengers, carrying around heavy silver trays from one table to the next, explaining over and over again to the passengers at each table what they saw on the tray. We fetched the snacks directly from the central kitchen via a service elevator. The pantry on Verandah deck had a battery of special ovens to keep the hot snacks warm during the cocktail hour. And we had to put a toothpick in each little snack by hand before serving. We bar boys made repeated rounds between the tables in the bar serving a variety of canapés over and over again between 5:30 – 7:00 PM. Small tips were received sometimes, and especially towards the end of a cruise.

The most commonly served Hors d'Oeuvres were Quiche Lorraine; meatballs served with chili sauce; 'pigs in blanket' (mini hot dogs with a wrapping of baked dough around the waist); water chestnuts rolled in bacon, served with tartar sauce; smoked salmon cuts on toast with mustard sauce and topped with a small piece of lemon; creamy blue cheese toppings on pumpernickel, and – on very, very, *very* rare occasions – at passengers' private parties only: Russian Caviar Malossol generously spooned over little coins of toast with a tiny piece of lemon on top. On exceptional occasions, when momentarily no one was watching, a sample bit or two of the expensive black caviar could quickly disappear from the silver tray into a deck waiter's mouth while he gently gazed away at the horizon with his most innocent look in the face...

When starting on Verandah deck I got acquainted with another 'straight' bar boy of my age, Tommy Stark from Stockholm, who had also been just promoted to "Barnisse" like myself, but was assigned to the Aft Bar instead. By sharing our experiences we learned the new job really fast. And after another three months time, both of us were promoted again, this time to become deck waiters in the Main Lounge, a position that both of us stayed on for the next year and a half. Neither of us could resist doing the enticing Far East and South Pacific cruise all over again!

Another bar boy I remember from 1971–72 was aforementioned Bobby from Czechoslovakia, who was stationed on the Promenade deck appointed to the Pool Bar and the Forward Lounge Bar. Bobby was a fugitive Soviet subject who had escaped to the West, now stateless. He got very upset when he one day spotted a big red Soviet flag on the wall in my cabin – just a souvenir of course – some days after Kungsholm's visit to Leningrad (now St. Petersburg)! Needless to say, he was no fan of Brezhnev & Co. And adding to Bobby's agony, Tommy and I used to tease him by asking, with serious faces, if he had received any news or letters lately from his fellow countrymen comrade Dubček and Husák (leaders of the oppressive regime) wanting him back...? Didn't they wonder about his current whereabouts...? Bobby got upset of course, to our great amusement, and did not want to have that conversation. So next time we asked again...

The crew and staff on Verandah deck

Altogether we were 35–40 SAL–employees working in different levels of service management, service, and support functions on the Verandah and Promenade decks. In contrast to the kitchen and the dining room, where German and Italian speaking personnel dominated, the majority of the Verandah deck crew was of Swedish origin. But there were other nationalities too: One bartender Bennie Meier and a deck waiter Tom Voss were from Holland; a bar steward Paul Steiner from Switzerland; a tall deck waiter (whose name I've forgot) from New Zealand; a deck waiter Randy Moreau from Austria/USA; a florist from Durban, South Africa; bar boy Bobby from Czechoslovakia; deck waiter Ole from Norway; four assistant chief stewards from Germany – Rolf Meyer, Willie Gebel, Richard Glatz and Richard Geber; bar steward Esa Karhu and deck waiters Erkki Mikkonnen and Kari Riutta from Finland; deck waiter Owen from Scotland; bartender Freddie Hansen and deck waiter Per Uth from Denmark; among others.

We all belonged to chief purser Curt Dawe's department, where Ingvar Torstensson was 2nd purser, and Erik Frostenius was the overall chief steward for both the dining room and the bars. At the operative level on Verandah deck we had one chief steward, crew number 601, who was highest in rank (interchangeably Allan Persson, Ingvar Gemzell and Rolf Mayer), followed by 2–3 assistant chief stewards, 6 bartenders, 4 bar stewards; 1 deck steward (Ingemar 'Andy' Sandell) ; 2 assistant deck stewards, 10–12 deck waiters, 3 bar boys, 1 pantry foreman (Bengt 'Sidney' Ohlsson) , 2–3 pantry hands, 1 night cleaner, 1 florist and 1 ambulating fire watchman and 1 ambulating ship's light bulb changer ('Pepé') who always carried a ladder with him wherever he went.

In addition, there were 10 American Cruise Office employees/entertainment staff headed by the cruise manager, plus an assistant cruise manager (or social hostess), a small orchestra, a small dance band and a Hammond player/vocalist, 2 professional dancers, a lecturer and a catholic priest. On long cruises there would also be a special bridge instructor onboard organizing the afternoon card play tournaments. The ship's photographer was subcontracted separately from a British firm and had a tiny photo shop on the portside Verandah deck.

Did life onboard swing?

Yes, it did! Although the vast majority of the passengers were aged "*between 60 and the grave*" – as we used to say – they really knew to enjoy themselves with onboard entertainment and cocktail parties and shows every night. Located mid-ship on Verandah deck, the Main Lounge offered daytime activities, such as bingo, playback horse races, and cha-cha dance lessons by the dance instructors Michael and Marlene Pekala, as well as evening and nightly entertainment to the passengers – often with Maestro Franz Racz and his Kungsholm orchestra in an endless variety of performances.

A handful of American cruise staff members (mostly gay males of varying ages) were specially hired to be social: accompanying, conversing, mingling and dancing with the passengers to ward off any boredom. In particular widowed single lady travelers were their target, to entertain during the afternoon tea, at the bridge table or on the dance floor. They also accompanied passenger's excursions ashore. As deck waiters we made it a sport trying to get some of the older American staff persons as drunk as possible as fast as possible when they were invited to a passengers' cocktail party. It was quite easy, since we waiters both poured and served simple standard drinks ourselves from a small bar buffet table located in one corner of the bigger cocktail parties. Thus, we made sure that the target's glass was constantly filled up and that the drink in it would be increasingly stronger in alcohol with each refill. When successful, we would after the party humbly assist the totally drunk target, with broad grins in our faces, to get up and set out for the embarrassing walk home to his cabin. In severe cases, the person might not show up in public again for the next couple of days, for shame or for sickness – or both.... In retrospect – well – yes: we young scamps owe an apology!

In some ports of call, native folkloric dance groups came aboard to perform in the Main Lounge. The samba shows in Rio de Janeiro were spectacular. The Spanish flamenco shows too, were colourful and rythmic. The dance performance of war painted and

feathered half naked tribal warriors in Torres Strait, outside Thursday Island between the northern tip of Australia and Papua New Guinea, were always held outdoors however, on the aft Verandah deck, as they were a really wild bunch and did not bring a pleasant scent aboard with them. Besides, they entered the Kungsholm from their wooden canoes by climbing on rope ladders that were thrown down to them on the outside of the ship, beating their drums and letting out wild tribal chants.

The cultural clash that suddenly came down upon the ship was as overwhelming as their smell! We were advised to lock all store rooms and outside lockers and guard the entrances to the interiors of the ship as the wild bunch was extremely difficult to manage if left alone and out of sight. We were warned by older bartenders and bosses that once inside they might snatch anything they could lay their hands on, and before anybody could stop them they would disappear swiftly overboard again to their canoes and be out of reach.

King Neptune

After leaving Senegal and Africa behind each Autumn we spent almost a week at sea, crossing the equator en route to Rio, with a traditional Neptune ceremony by the two outdoor swimming pools. It was a full day's feast for all crew and passengers alike who had not yet received King Neptune's blessing. I was baptized in November 1971 along with a bunch of other inexperienced crew members onboard. This is what happened:

At least a hundred seasoned seamen and other equator-baptized crew members were gathered on the prow around the crew pool to watch the spectacle. Sitting on a plank across the pool I was first forced to smell a rotting fish's head that was pressed up against my face and then I had to swallow a scoop of a horribly disgusting brew while the baptizer held his hand tightly over my mouth to prevent me from spitting it out again. At the same time someone smeared my head and face and body with an oily foam or lather of different colours before flipping the plank to dump me backwards into the pool. The audience clapped hands, whistled and yelled with amusement, at the same time greeting the next victim, who was already seated on the plank as I got out of the water.

The entire morning, a special squad of Neptune's dreaded policemen (headed by a big disguised and half naked assistant chief steward Willy Gebel) searched every corner of the ship hunting for hiding quitters with the aim to bring them before King Neptune – with force if necessary! I know one who escaped detection 1971 though, hiding for hours behind a thick curtain in the Aft smoking room... But that trick did not work the next time we crossed the equator!

Rio de Janeiro

The first day in Rio it was a custom that, after the vibrant public samba show in the Main Lounge, some of the higher bosses onboard invited lightly clad female dancers of their choice for some private samba in the Forward Lounge Verandah. We crew members of lesser rank had to go ashore for our entertainment which, by the way, was notoriously

plentiful in Rio – for gays and straights alike! Our stay in this exotic and swinging metropolis lasted for three memorable days (and two unforgettable nights).

On one occasion, in November 1972 I think it was, the ship didn't depart from Rio on schedule. The reason was a lack of able seamen to cast off. After hours of waiting, the Chief Officer headed ashore with a handful of his men, finding our seamen in the nearest port bar with girls in their laps, allegedly not very sober and obviously unwilling to part from paradise. When the whole troop somewhat later returned and crossed the ship's gang plank on unsteady feet they were greeted by vivid applauses and cheers from a multitude of crew and passengers who were following the spectacle from the outside deck from stern to prow.

Finally we could sail again! And, as we left the dock, a loud noise of shouting young voices aroise from the viewpoint terrace at the foot of the pier: One hundred, or maybe more, bar girls and Latin beauties crowded there waving and yelling their goodbyes to the Kungsholm... That was a magic moment – believe me – making a lasting impact on any young sailor onboard that day!

Rio de Janeiro was my first encounter with the Latin American continent. Its ambience was so different from anything I had experienced so far, and the New World instantly impressed on me. The Kungsholm made memorable stops also in other Latin American ports of call, like Bahia, Belem, Galapagos, Panama, Puerto Rico, San Blas, Trinidad & Tobago, Puerto Vallarta and Acapulco.

At that time I did not know that fate would twenty years later bring me back and make Latin America my home for ten good years. Without doubt, it was my early years on the Kungsholm that inspired me in that direction!

The deck waiters' duties

We were ten or twelve deck waiters on the Verandah deck, working interchangeably with standard tasks according to a rotating schedule. One of our main duties during days at sea was to set up and operate the daily buffet luncheon in the Forward Lounge on Promenade deck.

Starting on duty from 9:00 AM on the early shift, two of us first tidied-up the in the Main Lounge and the Aft Smoking Room after last night's evening programme, putting chairs and tables in order, changing ashtrays and renewing tablecloths wherever needed. Next, around 10:00 AM, we went one deck up to the Promenade deck to set up the U-formed buffet, getting folding tables from a nearby store room and covering them with white tablecloths. Then we sat down in a corner of the bar folding 150–200 linen napkins to a triangular shape. Cutlery, plates and glasses were brought from the starboard side pantry. Later, when the time was due, we fetched the food from the central kitchen on A-deck and brought it three decks up on trolleys via a service elevator. This was a tricky thing to do when the sea was rough, as the trolley sometimes tended to move abruptly sideways – unpredictably and at its own will. The fully loaded trolley with all its food dishes on shallow platters could suddenly turn into a heavy living force that was quite difficult even for two waiters together to curb without spilling

anything on the way. Sometimes we inched our way forward slowly and uneasily towards the waiting buffet tables....

As the buffet opened, at 1:00 PM sharp, one deck waiter greeted each arriving passenger with a smile and some small talk while handing out plates and the cutlery nicely wrapped into a napkin. The other waiter scooped up soup, handed out slices of cold dishes, and cut varieties of cheese to individual order. A cook from the kitchen was there too, in typical cooks' outfit, to cut and serve the hot dish of the day from a classy silver and mahogany "trancher" trolley. And, of course, a smiling assistant chief steward supervised the entire operation. The buffet luncheon was usually served 1:00–2:00 PM, during which time another couple of deck waiters joined in to pick used plates from the tables. The buffet was closed with half an hour rapid disassembly and cleaning-up, bringing the leftovers back to the kitchen (i.e. after the waiters first having a bite or two of their preferred dishes in the pantry on their way to the service elevator, which could take some time...).

The remaining six or eight deck waiters didn't start working until 2:30 PM, beginning with tidying up the Main Lounge and Aft Smoking Room all over again, whereupon two of them were subsequently in charge of setting up and operating the afternoon coffee and tea buffet to be served in the Main Lounge from 4:30 PM. Pantry foreman Bengt 'Sidney' Ohlsson with his two pantry assistants by him nicknamed 'Åttakanten' (Eight-square) and 'Fredag' (Friday) brewed the 'monkey piss' (Sidney's term for coffee) and the ice tea in big stainless canteens. Sidney had an inclination for nicknaming people in unusual ways. 'Limhamn-Jesus' was Sidney's name for the blond assistant deck steward Johan Jarekull, after the famous Christ statue in Rio that was built on site by a Swedish company, Skånska Cementgjuteriet.

Cocktail parties

In parallel with the tea buffet, deck waiters in teams of two or three spent the afternoon decorating rooms and lounges that had been reserved for passenger's private cocktail parties that coming evening. The party decorations were carried out under special instructions from an assistant chief steward, usually Ingvar 'Snow White' Gemzell who had a talent for backdrop décor after years in theater school and show business in Sweden and Finland. For fanciful decorations we often combined balloons and cheese cloth of different colours, and theme artifact props from a small storeroom outdoors on portside Verandah deck. It contained a wide collection of props, artifacts and costume details that we combined into party themes.

For each party, the host passenger(s) wanted a unique theme of course – not just a repetition of someone else's party. Hence, we could do Swedish theme, Russian theme, Mexican theme, Hawaiian theme, Equator theme, Mediterranean theme, American theme, Japanese theme, Irish theme, Chinese theme, Polynesian theme, Sailor theme, or whatever theme the passengers wanted. Snow White was an expert on inventing new themes anywhere the ship went. At one party near the International Date Line we strung up date fruits on a string across the room, symbolizing the date line, to the hostess's great enchantment.

Sometimes there could be requests for as many as five private cocktail parties to take place simultaneously in different lounges, rooms and libraries the same evening. And of course we had to decorate each party in a different style from the others, to please each host couple. The decoration, preparation and management of five simultaneous parties was quite some task and we got occasional support from dining room waiters and wine stewards to help us setting up the decorations as well as serving drinks and snacks at the parties. The overall responsibility was shouldered by Snow White who, in moments of extraordinary frustration and stress, would suddenly flip his hands in a feminine gesture exclaiming: “*Oh my God! – I think I’m having a miscarriage!*”.

The ship’s florist had a refrigerated floral storeroom in the main pantry on Verandah deck, where he kept his specially made custom floral arrangements for parties as well as a multitude of small vases for the tables in bars and lounges. It was not uncommon in tropical ports of call that Snow White went ashore with the florist, a machete knife and a waiter or two to collect exotic plants and flowers directly from the rain forest, for use as décor in upcoming cocktail parties.

In the late afternoon, just before 6:00 PM, deck waiters and bar stewards would always change cloths to a dark blue uniform with white shirt and a black bowtie. During the cocktail hour, usually 6:00–7:30 PM, deck waiters served drinks and hors d’oeuvres at the passengers’ private parties dressed up in costumes according to the theme chosen by the host of each cocktail party. We could dress up as cowboys, maharajas, sailors, Indians, Mexicans, or other folklore styles as requested – often combining props garments with items from our private wardrobes. The passengers were delighted. And at many of the parties someone tuned up the Kungsholm song and the passengers and the waiters would then sing along together: “*Of all the ships that sail the sea, the ship for me is the Kungsholm...etc*”. The tips we earned after a cocktail party as waiters were probably proportional to the effort we made in terms of service attitude, decorations and costumes.

Service elevator chaos

Twice a day, around lunchtime and just before the evening cocktail hour in the afternoon, there was a fierce competition among the deck waiters and the bar boys for the service elevators. The service elevators were indispensable, and there were only two of them. But only one went all the way up to the Promenade deck and the snack bar.

For the daily buffet luncheon on Promenade deck all foodstuff had to be fetched from the central kitchen on A–deck, where the portside service elevator stopped just in front of the cold kitchen and the starboard side elevator stopped in front of the A–deck main pantry (near the central dish wash).

At the same time, weather permitting, the snack bar was open for hamburger lunch, salads and ice cream on the Pool deck located mid–ship. Here, food supplies and replenishment were equally urgent as for the buffet luncheon on forward Promenade deck. Bobby – the Czechoslovakian snack bar boy – was nearly always first to snatch the elevator, keeping it blocked for others to use by keeping its doors open at length while

waiting for “his” food from the kitchen. Hence, buffet luncheon supplies had to wait. And being delayed by Bobby the deck waiters’ frustration grew by the minute...

The same thing happened at cocktail time when the hot and cold ‘Hors d’Oeuvres’ were wanted simultaneously by the three bars and by multiple private cocktail parties on the Verandah and Promenade decks. It’s an understatement to say that the rivalry over the service elevators was fierce – it was a virtual WAR each day – between bar boys and deck waiters, and also among deck waiters themselves, and sometimes a pantry boy or a dining room waiter got into the crossfire too when hijacking the elevator at an inappropriate time!

Everyone wanted the elevator, and dirty tricks to snatch it from others right under their noses were common! Every day, as a result, the pale green elevator doors received innumerable angry fists and four letter words whenever it unexpectedly took off with someone else, was occupied too long, or was simply unavailable when needed just because some son-of-a-mother had omitted to close the doors properly way down on C-deck after use, on purpose or just by mistake!

It should be explained why the service staircase, located right beside the starboard side service elevator, was no viable alternative: The staircase was far too steep for carrying heavy loads on trays up and down the three-four decks while trying to keep the balance against the movements of the sea. Forget rough weather! The staircase was also too narrow for meeting traffic with food trays in both directions. Moreover, dining room waiters used to crowd inside the staircase on A-deck to sit and hang around the stairs taking a smoke before, between and after their servings in the dining room, making passage very difficult for others. Hence, there was always friction in the staircase and especially when the elevator was out of service.

Evenings at sea

When the passengers left for dinner at 07:30 PM all the cocktail party decorations were taken down. The Main Lounge was tidied-up once again after the afternoon’s card playing, scrabble, tea-time, and cigar smoking. Curtains were pulled to cover the large windows, and lights were dimmed. Showtime coming up next! In the Forward Lounge the wavy drapes were lowered.

When the passengers were dining between 7:30 and 9:00 PM, all the musicians gathered in their usual starboard side corner of the Main Lounge to have a beer or a drink, waiting for their turn to earn their wage during that evenings’ entertainment from the ship’s main stage. The accordionist, however, was frequently called upon to play in the dining room whenever there was a birthday to celebrate.

The entire evening, six deck waiters waited upon the passengers in the Main Lounge with drink orders, demitasses of coffee, nuts and pretzels – sometimes until past 01:00 AM. In parallel, two deck waiters attended passengers who preferred spending the evening in the Aft Smoking Room, where sometimes live music was played too by a small band, or in the Forward Lounge, just a solo vocalist with a Hammond organ sounding like a complete orchestra. Late evenings at 11:00 PM a small smorgasbord buffet of cold

and hot dishes was served the hour until midnight in the Forward Lounge on Promenade deck.

After work

After working hours, usually well past midnight, deck waiters coming off duty gathered in each others' cabins for a chat and a beer or a drink. Special occasions or not, there was always an excuse for throwing a spontaneous after-work party. And it was amazing how many people a small crew cabin could swallow, squeezing in to sit wherever a few square inches could be spared. And if the cabin space was not enough, for example when someone had a birthday, the party often expanded into the floor of the corridor with the doors open. Anyone was welcome to join, and even the Fire Watchman would stop by a while when passing on his nightly round.

Deck waiters working late did not go straight to bed. After-work sessions could extend for many hours, and eventually growing hunger would set in usually at around 4:00–5:00 AM in the morning. It was the appropriate time for sending out a couple of food-fixers. It was time to visit Charlie baker ("Kalle bagare") in the night bakery on C-deck. After some introductory small talk about the previous and the next ports of call, and asking politely, we would get some warm rolls directly from the oven, and some butter, for bringing back to our starving colleagues in the cabin. Sometimes we took a tour also to the central kitchen, desolate at that early hour, where we could usually find some leftovers from the dinner and some bits and pieces from the night buffet. Our colleague deck waiter Jerry Jakobsson from Kramfors was in fact also a trained cook. He could make amazing improvisations happen on the kitchen frying boards and stoves in the middle of the night. Bringing fresh bread and warm food back to the cabin was always welcome, and awarded another beer or two.

The late hour was seldom any problem as the deck waiters that had worked until very late did not go on duty again until 2:30 PM in the afternoon the following day. The other shifts started at 09:00 AM or 12:00 Noon.

Serving drinks

When serving drinks to passengers, deck waiters first took the drink order at the table. We had little notepads, but over time we learned to memorize quite long drink orders from a big table without taking any notes. And if we knew a passenger from earlier on the cruise, we would usually remember his/her standard drink too, and any special variations they wanted. The waiters' trick to make impression was asking with a statement: "*Only one ice cube, Sir, as usual?*" or "*Your favourite, Ma'am, a vodka martini with two olives, no lemon twist!*". A good memory often awarded tips, sooner or later...

It was also a sport for us deck waiters to be snappy with the cigarette lighter whenever a passenger wanted to smoke. Sometimes 3–4 waiters could jump forward like a bee swarm to the same passenger, with their lighters ready to fire, when he/she picked a

package of cigarettes out of a tuxedo or a purse. Everyone laughed! We pampered them in simple ways, and that made them feel special.... They liked that. And we all had fun!

Having recorded the drink order it next had to be placed with a bartender, keeping track of all the special requests and variations. Each time the tray was loaded, before leaving the bar desk, we had to pay the barman up front in cash for the drink order, out of our own pockets – following the official Kungsholm cocktail price list. Waiters had no credit whatsoever in any of the bars. Hence, we always kept a fat bundle of dollar bills and coins in one pocket, enough working capital to manage one evening's cash flow. And at the end of the shift we would always have a few more dollars in the pocket!

At times we could carry as many as 10–15 drinks on the same tray, separating similar looking drinks only by the colour of the cocktail stirrers. A common code, if I remember correctly, was blue for bourbon and red for scotch. Green was gin and white was vodka. Black could be the more expensive whiskies like Black Label or Chivas Regal. Just before serving, the stirrers were taken out and put aside on the tray, except for the long mixed drinks that required stirrers. In 1973, the price of a regular scotch on the rocks was 55 cents and vodka tonic 45 cents aboard the Kungsholm.

At the end of the cocktail hour, or evening show, we added up all the rounds of drinks at each table and charged the paying passenger the total. Tipping was always at the discretion of the guest. Some passengers signed the bills adding 10–15 percent tips, others paid cash at the table leaving the change for tips. By the end of each night we turned in the signed bar tabs to the barman and got cash back in exchange, including any tips that the passenger might have added on to it when signing. We could earn anything from a few bucks to twenty dollars in a lucky evening. And much more on the last day of a cruise!

Some passengers didn't drink much but were good tippers anyway, like old wealthy Mrs. Rockefeller. She only ordered a demitasse of coffee, sitting each evening at the same table watching the entertainment in the Main Lounge. And she always left a nicely folded five dollar bill discretely hidden under the saucer when she left for the night – if the service had been courteous and the table setting spotless that evening. As Mrs. Rockefeller was a well known repeater on the Kungsholm, our bosses encouraged us mind the details, polish the silver spoon and coffee pot a little bit extra for her, take away any crumbs under the table, and always change the table cloth for a new one – whether needed or not – before she arrived.

Gangway watch

When the Kungsholm arrived to a port of call the bars onboard were closed, and the deck waiters became redundant and were free to go ashore, except for one or two whose turn it was to attend to the Main Lounge, and except those few who were scheduled for gangway watch duty. There was always someone from Verandah deck on watch at the gangway jointly with an officer from the bridge or a senior boatswain. Assistant deck stewards from Promenade deck were also assigned to gangway watch duty. In ports with tender service there was one waiter attending at the gateway onboard and another one at the docking pier ashore to receive and depart passengers from/to the tender boat.

Our task was to encourage departing passengers to watch their step, and helpfully support the elbow of elderly ladies as they stepped out onto the gangway. And, upon their return we greeted them welcome aboard again, asking how their day had been, offering a supportive hand as they stepped off the gangway, repeating our eternal mantra “*Watch your step please, Ma’am/Sir!*”, putting on our best ‘ten dollar smile’, as Tommy Stark used to say, or better up: a fifteen dollar one when a passenger was known to be a good tipper... Pinned up above the entrance to the ship, underlining the *home-away-from-home* feeling, there was a welcome-home sign with a happily smiling Viking greeting passengers back aboard.

A gangway watch shift would usually extend between two and three hours, and required a good bladder. Depending on the type of gangway that was used, something that shifted from port to port, a gangway watch could be positioned onboard inside the gate opening in the hull or outside on the pier at the foot of the gangway. When positioned outside we could also follow the maintenance work that was frequently done to the ship’s exterior while docked. In certain ports, e.g. Panama, the hull was cleansed from algae and barnacles under the waterline by divers with special equipment. And in others the white hull paint was refreshed by men clinging and hanging on rope ladders on the ship’s outside. By daybreak in Hong Kong 1972 the ship was unexpectedly invaded by a hundred or more Chinese workers, and there were ropes and boards and paint buckets swinging all over the ship for two days, restoring the spotless whiteness that was an important part of SAL’s trademark.

Language lesson

In the beginning, with my rudimentary British school English I didn’t always understand everything the American passengers said to me. Although I learned fast, awkward situations happened.

One Easter I got involved in an afternoon conversation with an elderly couple in the Main Lounge, and they asked me if we Swedes also have a traditional bunny for Easter. I responded “*No Ma’am, we have a cock!*”, whereupon the elderly couple stared at me in astonishment and started whispering to each other... In a flash I realized my blunder and added, blushing with embarrassment, that “*we in Sweden have a cock – a rooster – not a bunny for Easter.*” Whereupon the old couple started laughing aloud with obvious relief, and the lady burst out in broad American accent: “*Oh, you mean a COCK*” (pronouncing a long open [a:] = Kaak).

That was of course exactly what I had intended in the first place, but my Swenglish pronunciation twisted everything... I nodded a smile in frustration and retreated quickly behind the swing doors to the pantry.

Gays and straights

When starting as a potato peeler, the first months onboard, I was amazed by the girlish men that sometimes whirled through the C-deck corridor on after work hours, wearing extremely tight velvet hot pants, plateau shoes, make-up and various sorts of womanish spangle. Usually carrying a smile and, more often than not, equipped with a drink in

one hand with the little finger pointing straight out. I was perplexed at first, but I soon got used to it as it was a recurrent phenomenon. I also learned that presumably they were just passing by on their way to a party on 'higher grounds', i.e. the forward B-deck or A-deck, where many of the bar and dining room waiters had their quarters.

In the early seventies the pride revolution was still some decades away, not yet invented. But aboard the cruise ships there was a culture of openness and tolerance. The Kungsholm was no exception. The Kungsholm represented a coexistence of around 40 nationalities with a wide array of different beliefs, cultures, diets, habits, languages, needs, preferences and sexuality. Inside a vessel of just 200 meters in length it was a tremendous population mix. Yet we had few integration problems, if any, as far as I could understand. There were many gays and they could come out liberated in a safe way. There were many straights too, of course. Between the groups there was an air of mutual acceptance.

Admittedly it took me a while, but after some months onboard I had adapted fairly well to the ship's internal culture. Although I did not understand the gay way of life I quickly accepted its presence onboard since it did not mean any inconvenience to me personally. One could say that we were simply good neighbours, minding each one his own business.

Three months after embarkation, when I was promoted to become a bar boy on Verandah deck, I found out that about half the personnel there were gay. The first day on my new job bartender Bennie (from Holland) asked if I had met my superior boss 'Snow White' yet. I hadn't, but when I did, that nickname made a lot of sense to me: A tall and extremely blond Swedish chief steward in short evening jacket with rank stripes and tight pants greeted me welcome to his service staff with a graceful smile, a feminine gesture with one hand and a well rehearsed theatrical nod with his head. Indeed, Ingvar Gemzell had an air of 'Snow White' about him.

Open and high-spirited jargon

The Verandah deck jargon served as a mutually accepted interface that relaxed work interrelations between gay and straight men (no women worked on that deck). Backstage, in the main Verandah deck pantry, assistant chief steward Rolf Mayer often coached his deck waiters to keep up the good working spirit, especially after something had gone wrong in the Main Lounge or when there was some obvious disappointment among the waiters in the group. Then Rolf would gather us around him and exclaim with a big friendly laugh: *"Come on you guys, remember – we are one big happy family on this ship!"*

And we were indeed a merry team of co-workers. There was no tension between gays and non-gays. On the contrary – a kind of humorous jargon was firmly rooted on Verandah deck, loaded with indecent connotations and insinuating jokes – generally about sex in one form or another – both gay and straight. The jokes were often spontaneous with a gay wittiness that would probably be considered grossly vulgar under normal circumstances. But Verandah deck was not any normal circumstance! Its humorous backstage mood was sustained by several colourful personalities who cracked

new gags, puns and witty statements that we all shared and laughed about together in the course of a day.

Cruise manager John Timko (“from Budapest Strasse”) was one such personality. Ex follies actor Snow White was another. And the pantry foreman Bengt ‘Sidney’ Ohlsson was quite a character too. Others followed suit. Deck waiters Jerry Jacobsson and Åke Sandahl had a talent for wordplay. Deck steward Ingemar ‘Andy’ Sandell and some of the seasoned bartenders like Stig Arnot and Kalle “Kula” Karlsson could also be quite witty now and then, as could bar steward Peter Baumgardt. Peter had a bit eccentric taste and when off duty he always wore extremely high plateau shoes and expensive New York designer shirts and shaded eye glasses. He would have fitted in anytime at Hollywood or Las Vegas. Veteran assistant chief steward Arthur Lindell was a boss with an old fashioned style and lots of dignity, but he also had a fine sense of humour. Deck waiter Tommy Stark sometimes turned Arthur Lindell into his amused accomplice in playing quite elaborate pranks with me and others. Once somewhere in northern Europe, Tommy exchanged a diapositive on port highlights in the slide projector of the ship’s lecturer, putting a picture of a hot samba dancer in bikini instead of some local folklore. Of course, when the time came, the lecturer lost his face in front of the passengers. Then Arthur Lindell smiled with amusement from the back row in the cinema theatre, telling Tommy his appreciation of the practical joke afterwards.

The SAL heritage

The Kungsholm of 1966 was the last heir in a long line of White (and some black) Viking Liners since 1915. During my years onboard I got in contact with several crew members who could tell stories from precursor SAL liners where they had worked. One of the bartenders, Kjell Karlsson, told me about his own experience as a very young crew member aboard the MS Stockholm during the fatal collision with MS Andra Doria in 1956. And assistant chief steward Arthur Lindell had started his career aboard the SS Drottningholm (built 1905) as ‘smörgåsnisse’ (“dining room hand”) in the dining room. Those days they were six crew members sharing each cabin, he told us, and the dining room hands had to kneel under the tables between the meals with a toothbrush in their hand to brush off any small crumbs that might have fallen onto the carpet. Of course, the vacuum cleaner was not yet invented then...

In his younger days, Arthur Lindell had been a dancer in Stockholm. Still at the age just under 65 he would occasionally attempt a small but elegant pirouette on the Main Lounge dance floor when he thought no one was watching... But I caught him in the act once, whereupon he reluctantly admitted his past talent – without concealing a proud smile...

Elvis onboard

For some months in 1972 or –73 we had a young man from Greenland onboard (can’t remember his name), working somewhere around the crew cafeteria or officers’ mess, I think. He was a big fan of Elvis Presley and he had brought aboard with him his own tailored Elvis–in–Vegas costume. He was very keen to put on his idol outfit and whenever there was an opportunity he volunteered to rip off Elvis impersonation shows

in a language that somewhat resembled English. That happened on a few crew evenings in the cafeteria, as many of us will surely remember.

Sometimes he also went ashore wearing the complete Elvis outfit, and succeeded to get up on stage in some port bars doing his performance live with a local band. Without prior rehearsal, neither the show nor the singing was top of the line, to use an understatement. But his sober enthusiasm was very genuine and worth a mention.

Stormy weather

Crossing the North Atlantic we ran into a severe autumn hurricane in 1972, waves breaking windows on the tenth deck and in the Main Lounge, and crushing a lot of table chinaware one rough night. When we started work as deck waiters the next morning, there were no passengers in sight and all the furniture in the Aft Smoking Room had dislocated and was heaped up into one big mess in a corner of the big room. We couldn't quite grasp how that was even possible... Very few passengers were seen around the ship that entire day. But it was quite understandable: Trying to walk the stairs from one deck to another in a heavy storm one can really feel the forces at play: One instant you fly up or down the stairs headlong and light as a feather, and the next minute your limbs become heavy as lead, almost impossible to move!

Sleeping out

Now and then in a tropical calm sea, my colleague Tommy Stark and I opted to sleep out in the open on the prow deck. There were a couple of deep enough ledges at the very front of the prow where we could curdle up, one on each side of the prow mast. We brought blankets and pillows with us from our cabins. The warm tropical breeze was soothing and the fresh air made us sleep very hard, even atop the hard steel ledgers. By daybreak around 6:00 AM next morning a seaman would come to wash the entire prow deck with water from a pressure hose. We had to wake up fast and return to our cabins – or get very wet! Eventually, we were stopped from sleeping on the prow. A passenger had seen us and complained to the front desk allegations that the crew did not have air conditioned cabins.

Nicholson's ointment

Certain ports of call were infamous and before arrival we got a message of warning from the shipping company – printed in several languages – encouraging abstinence or the use of condoms. There would also be two blue steel boxes at the crew gangway with free rubbers and Nicholson's ointment to prevent and protect against venereal diseases. And in case that did not help there was a clinic onboard, and a male Swedish paramedics commonly nicknamed 'Ollonborren' [double meaning in Swedish: cockchafer beetle / "the dickhead drill"], who was trained to provide treatment to unfortunate crew members. In order to highlight the seriousness of the matter, the ship's doctor would sometimes lecture to the crew about the dangers of free intercourse.

Boogie Street

In Singapore we could buy jewelry at very competitive prices. But, of course, a stop in Singapore would not be complete without a late evening visit to world famous “Boogie Street” where numerous trans women from all corners of the world were the key tourist attraction, working there as street bar waitresses. Many of them were pretty and really looked like girls. Together with street photographers they made a few bucks posing for a Polaroid photo in the lap of passing tourists. All crew categories from the Kungsholm, including top officers and passengers, came to Boogie Street to have a drink and see the magic of changing gender – a surgery that was taboo elsewhere in the world in those days. For me, it was an odd experience when a young woman seated herself in my lap and then started to talk to me with a deep tenor voice. I did not dare thinking, and much less asking, what she might have under the skirt... Didn't want to find out!

The snuff crisis 1972

My grandmother was disgusted and my mother hated it, but for me and my generation it was a back-to-the-roots kind of thing. I'm talking about Swedish snuff, the ground tobacco you stuff under your upper lip and let it soak there to get a really fast and reliable nicotine kick. The downside is that it makes your smile skew and brown from running tobacco. Snuff is in fact by many regarded to be more addictive than cigarettes, and far more difficult to give up – says one who knows...! Anyway, numerous young crew members in all departments of the Kungsholm used snuff instead of cigarettes when I worked there, including many of the bar boys, deck waiters and assistant deck stewards on Verandah deck.

However, when leaving Gothenburg in September 1972 every snuff addict on Verandah deck had drastically miscalculated their future consumption, facing nine months ahead without any opportunity for replenishment. The situation got really gruesome after a while. Then I got an idea! It was a long shot. I wrote a letter to the Swedish Tobacco Company in Stockholm, asking them to quote the cost of a rescue shipment by post of 150 cans of snuff to us sailors in a state of emergency onboard the MS Kungsholm, explaining that we were very far away on a distant ocean and with no hope in sight for the next seven months or so. Having dispatched the letter, getting no reply soon I forgot about the whole thing, until one day ‘out of the blue’ on the 29th of December I received a radio telegram from Stockholm saying “*ARRANGING FREE SNUFF BY AIR TOO EXPENSIVE TO INVOICE HAPPY NEW YEAR SWETOBACCO*”. And upon our next return to Manhattan, at Pier 97 there was a big package waiting for me, cleared by US Customs (for a fee), along with a letter from the Sales manager of the tobacco company.

As I distributed the merchandise among my co-workers the spirit was record high on Verandah and Promenade deck. Gratefully, I wrote an open thanks letter to a major daily newspaper (DN) in Stockholm, which became published in the section “Dagens ros” with a special mention of the Swedish Tobacco Company and its appreciated rescue operation to needy sailors overseas on the Kungsholm. It was probably the first and only time a tobacco company has been praised to the skies that way in Sweden! Today, it would not be politically appropriate....

Vingasupen

At the river entrance to Gothenburg ships have to pass a lighthouse named “Vinga”. It used to be a tradition among Swedish seamen when returning after a long journey at sea to take a shot of aquavit, called ‘Vingasupen’, when passing the lighthouse, as a celebration and a reward for having made it safely back home again. In June 1973, after nine months away from home, the Kungsholm returned safely back to Gothenburg and a number of us young people on Verandah and Promenade deck were about to sign off. Before breakfast that day we gathered in the Deck stewards’ little store room on starboard Verandah deck to have a Vingasup together before starting with that day’s duties. It was Johan Jarekull, Bengt Hult, Sten Hovne, Ove Pedersehn, Tommy Klang, ‘Åttakanten’, Hasse Andersson, Bengt Löfgren, myself and a many more earlybirds whose names I have forgotten who also dropped by to have a Vingasup.

Signing off the ship next day I had to rent a big Volvo station wagon to manage transporting all the electronics, souvenirs and other personal belongings that I had accumulated during the past year from various corners of the world. Luckily, my parents had a house with a basement and a garage!

Repatriation 1975

My career onboard started 1971 in the ship’s kitchen department. Advancing stepwise from there, I became a bar steward by 1973. And after an interruption for military service and first year university studies, I made a half year comeback onboard in 1975 – signing off in Amsterdam just before the Kungsholm’s final crossing as a SAL Ocean Liner to New York.

My SAL Kungsholm career in a nutshell:

Crew No.	Position	From – to
324	Kitchen hand	1971 June – Sept.
616	Bar boy	1971 Sept. – Dec.
629	Deck waiter	1971 Dec. – 1973 May
610	Bar steward	1973 May – June
624	Deck waiter	1975 May – August

By coincidence, my repatriation flight home from Amsterdam to Sweden, via Copenhagen, in August 1975 was with a SAS Metropolitan propeller aircraft, pet named the *SAS Flying Vikings* since their incorporation into the Scandinavian Airlines’ fleet in the late 1950’ies. In October 1975, the few remaining propeller aircrafts were abandoned by SAS in favour of all jets. Hence, two classic Viking fleets with lots of character and history ceased to operate that same year 1975 – at sea and in the air. I miss them both!

After Kungsholm – where did I go?

After the Kungsholm years I served in the Royal Swedish Navy for 12 months as a cook onboard a small mine sweeper, cooking my way along almost the entire coastline of Sweden. Studies in economics followed in Sweden and in Britain. Thereafter I spent

almost fifteen years living and working in tropical countries – Nicaragua, Mozambique, Bolivia, Guinea–Bissau, and Ethiopia – as a development adviser, promoting industrial investments and trade in close collaboration with local chambers of commerce, business membership organizations and the ministries of industry.

My taste for the tropics was acquired very much thanks to the Kungsholm. A couple of faded tattoos still remind me of younger days and exotic destinations around the world forty years ago. In recent years, as of 2010, I retreated to work as a programme manager at a business history archive in Stockholm. My retirement is coming up next, around 2017.

In recent years I have resumed contact with a number of past shipmates and colleagues from the Verandah deck: Tommy Stark, Sten Hovne, Åke Sandahl, Johan Jarekull, Bengt Persson, Tommy Klang and Peter Baumgardt. And thanks to good networking by Tommy Stark I have also had the opportunity to meet some of my former bosses again: Rolf G. Mayer and Ingvar ‘Snow White’ Gemzell, as well as Commander Kjell Smitterberg.

Reuniting with my old shipmates again after forty years I can only reconfirm what Rolf Mayer used to say about us Kungsholmers forty years ago: “*We are one big happy family on this ship*”. His words are still valid! And the same motto is de–facto manifested for the entire SAL by former crew and passengers through their memorable contributions to the website www.salship.se

Favourite places

Ever since my boyhood in front to the television set watching Villerville in the early sixties, my longing has been set on the rocky volcanic silhouettes of French Polynesia. With the Kungsholm I was fortunate to visit those mythical paradise islands already in my youth – all the way from Nuku Hiva and the Marquesas Islands in the north to Tahiti and Moorea among the Society Islands in the south. It was a dream come–true, not only once but twice: 1972 and 1973. Twenty years later I returned there in 1996 as a tourist with my family for a five weeks vacation over Christmas and New Year on the Rangiroa atoll, including a much longed–for revisit to Papeete and Moorea of course. Not much had changed! Out there, in the middle of the biggest ocean on earth it is the same natural beauty and the same laid back, relaxed life style as it has always been, and will probably always be. And I will always long to go back there again, and again!

Hence, if the Kungsholm were still around as a SAL Liner I wouldn’t mind signing on again tomorrow bound for the Far East and the South Pacific! Or anywhere else for that matter.... Who wouldn’t?

Greetings to all!

hg@psd.se