

# The Fisherman from the Devil's Marsh

## The Story of a Ship Model of 1744 from Hel at the Gdansk Bay

*„Herrjeester, Mann! Wi sull wi dat utholle? Dat djeiht nich goot!“<sup>1</sup> Hans Becker stood anxiously with a group of Hel fishermen on the beach and looked out over the bay. The whole village had come together. A Russian fleet, bristling with guns, had sailed into Gdansk Bay. Hans Becker saw these great ships like spiky iron-and-fire-breathing monsters.*



The Hel ship model of 1744 (Fishery Museum Hel)

Shortly after the beginning of the last great war, Hans Becker was born in 1702 in Karwieńskie Błota<sup>2</sup> at the Baltic Sea. He was only a year old when the Swedish troops moved into quarters in Pomerania and had to be supplied by the residents there. Karwieńskie Błota, called "Czarty" or "Devil's Marsh" by the Kashubians, was a settlement that only came into being in 1599, when the "Starost"<sup>3</sup> Hans of Weyher signed a lease agreement with settlers to reclaim a useless swamp area. There was extremely hard work to be done here.

<sup>1</sup> Low German spoken in Hel: „God dammit! How are we supposed to stand it! That will not go well!“

<sup>2</sup> German: Karwenbruch

<sup>3</sup> In Poland a „Starost“ was a county sheriff, who administered crown territory.

The sea, rainfall and drifting sand often ruined the progress, which is why the first settlers gave up and Lutheran and possibly also Calvinist immigrants from North Friesland and Holstein, called "Holandry" by the Kashubians, continued their work. The years 1708 and 1709 turned out to be the most memorable experience for the six-year-old Hans Becker. In the wake of the soldiers, a particular severe outbreak of the Black Death struck the residents of Pomerania. Almost a third of the residents, especially children, died of great suffering. Some families lost all of their offspring. Furthermore, when the Baltic Sea poured into the Karwieńskie Błota during a storm in 1709, the long lasting efforts of cultivation were ruined and the Karwieńskie Błota was turned back into a quagmire. The settlers had to restart with the draining of the "Devil's Marsh" under great distress. Life seemed better everywhere than in Karwieńskie Błota. At the age of twenty-three, in November 1725 the self-confessed Calvinist Hans Becker married Barbara Plog in Hel, who was many years older than him. The preacher wrote in the church book: "The bride could well be the groom's mother." Even if life in the small town of Hel was not easy, the acquisition of Hel citizenship was still desirable for many, also because Hel was possessed by the rich trading city of Gdansk. After the death of his first wife, Hans Becker married for the second time in November 1731. His marriage to Anna Maria Rudnick is said to have three



Fishermen at the Beach (Etching of Berthold Hellingrath, Hel, ca. 1910)

children. The first, his daughter Anna Maria, was born in March 1733, just six months before the outbreak of war.

„I knew I was born to make a figure in the world.“

Redmond Barry in „The Luck of Barry Lyndon“ by William Makepeace Thackeray, 1844



The gambler Stanislaus Leszczyński had not seen this

**Nicolas de Larmessin III: Le Roy Stanislas (1730-40, acc. to Jean Baptiste van Loo, British Museum CC BY-NC-SA 4.0, unmodified)**

outbreak of war coming – at least not so quickly! He came from an old Lviv<sup>4</sup> aristocratic family and had laboriously served up in the civil service of the Polish-Lithuanian aristocratic republic. Once before, he had been king for a short time. During the Great Northern War, which lasted 21 years, he changed sides with a minority of the nobility and was made King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania by the then victorious ruler of Sweden. But when the fortunes of war changed, the rightful King Augustus the Strong persecuted him and his followers ruthlessly. The now penniless Leszczyński first fled into exile to Sweden. He wanted to abdicate, return the useless crown, and be reconciled with the strong Augustus, but the King of Sweden forbade him to do this. After the death of his "patron"

he went to France. There, the bulky crown, which he still carried with him, turned out to be a stroke of luck for him and his family. In August 1725, the French king, who was only 15 years old, and Leszczyński's 22-year-old daughter Maria were married by distance. When Augustus the Strong died in 1733, Leszczyński had a seemingly unique opportunity that is seldom seen by people on earth. He hastily returned to Poland and was elected the new king by the greater part of the nobility. But he had completely misjudged the political situation and only a few weeks later he had to flee from an allied Russian-Austrian-Saxon army and another part of the Polish nobility. He narrowly escaped arrest. He reached Gdansk<sup>5</sup> just in time, where the mayors Gabriel of Bömeln, Johann Gottfried of Disseldorf, Gottfried Bentzmann and Carl Groddeck took care of him and granted him asylum. But this decision was to have serious consequences for the city of Gdansk. Within a short time she was surrounded, besieged and bombed by a Russian-Saxon army.

On May 1st, 1734, when Anna Maria Becker was only 14 months old, Russian Cossacks came to Hel for the first time. The people from Hel, who were fishing for salmon on the beach from April to June, were regularly asked about passing ships and were supposed to supply 1,800 soldiers. How were the poor fishermen supposed to do that? The French king had actively supported the claim to the throne of his father-in-law Stanislaus by unleashing a war in the west and now sent a fleet with an expeditionary corps to turn the war in Poland or at least bring Leszczyński safely back to France. But Leszczyński was trapped and had to use all his powers of persuasion to keep the Gdańsk magistrate from surrendering. How long would the heavily fortified city of Gdansk be able to withstand the vastly superior Russian-Saxon troops?

<sup>4</sup> German: Lemberg

<sup>5</sup> German: Danzig



**Johann Baptist Hohmann: That bombed Gdansk (1740, Cutout, courtesy of this image by Hammelburger Antiquariat, <https://www.antiquariatriedel.com>)**

On May 13th, 1734 the people from Hel were in complete panic: The "Muscovites" allegedly had already lit the pitch wreaths to burn down all the villages on the peninsula. Like many others, Hans Becker prayed to God for help. The preacher Johan Eilhard Meyer hurried with a third of the parish across the Gdansk Bay to Wisłoujście<sup>6</sup>, seeking the shelter of the Gdańsk fortress. But the Russian lieutenant colonel in Puck quickly gave the all-clear: The fishermen families of Hel would have nothing to fear from the Russians. He ordered them to monitor the sea and to report ship movements immediately. The preacher and the other refugees then returned to Hel, but the military situation was getting worse and one did not seem to know whether to trust the fishermen from Hel. The Hel reeve Paul Semel and the mayor Carl Valentin Plog were picked up by six dragoons and had to report personally to the lieutenant colonel and assure that no warships have been seen yet. The mayor was then sent home. However, the reeve was brought to Gdansk-

Lengforda<sup>7</sup> by the Dragoons to confirm the same in writing to General Peter Lacy, the local commander-in-chief. But for the reeve Paul Semel the journey did not end until he gave the same insurance to the Russian Field Marshal Burkhard Christoph of Münnich in Pruszcz Gdański<sup>8</sup>. Both, the Irishman Peter Lacy and the German-Dane Christoph of Münnich, had already been employed as professional soldiers in countless wars in three or even four European armies when they entered the Russian service and reached the highest offices there. They had driven Leszczyński from Warsaw and pursued him as far as Gdansk. But the heavily fortified Gdansk was not so easy to conquer, so they waited for



**Field Marshal General Burkhard Christoph von Münnich, who is in Russian service (Image: [www.motherlandofelephants.com](http://www.motherlandofelephants.com))**

the arrival of a Russian fleet to reinforce their army with siege guns. It was a head-to-head race, which fleet would arrive first.

At the end of May 1734, the French fleet arrived, which the desperate Stanislaus Leszczyński had been awaiting for a big time. It deployed troops northwest of Wisłoujście. But the reinforcement was less than expected and Leszczyński's opponents acted quickly and did not allow the French to establish themselves near

<sup>6</sup> German: Weichselmünde

<sup>7</sup> German: Danzig-Langfuhr

<sup>8</sup> German: Praust

Wisłoujście. The only thing left for the French expeditionary force to do against the superior enemy force was to surrender. The French admiral then sailed back to France without success, just two weeks before the Russian fleet arrived in Hel. At that time the Russian navy was the third strongest sea power in the world, after the English and French. The fishermen of Hel relayed all information about the Russian fleet to Gdansk. This consisted of 14 ships of the line, 8 frigates, 2 Bomb vessels and one fireship. 25 ships with a total of 1,154 cannons and 7,985 sailors. The admiral's ship alone was extremely impressive:

„This ship carries the name Petrus I. because it was the late Russian Emperor Petrus. I.who had it built, it has 100 cannons and a thousand sailors on it, it is one of the largest and most beautiful, as seen in Europe, it's length is 175 feet, but the width is 52 feet. The cannons on it are divided into 4 orders. The first of 30 pounds of bullets, the other of 18 pounds, the third of 12 pounds, the fourth of 6 pounds: besides these, there are still many pieces in reserve on the ship.

The workmanship and the whole construction on this ship is extremely splendid. An open, very spacious and leisurely gallery surrounds the rear of the ship. The great hall is 24 feet long and 18 feet wide. It is entirely covered with fragrant wood, and decorated with a lot of artificial sculptural work as well as a large number of mirrors, set into the walls. Those rooms the admiral lives in are lined with cedarwood, and one sees an uncommon splendor and preciousness everywhere.“

Apparently the commander of the Gdansk fortress of Wisłoujście was also impressed. For eleven days he struggled to make a decision. Then, on June 23, 1734, he handed over the fortress "without firing a single shot", which the Russian fleet celebrated with joyful shots from their 1,154 cannons. In nearby Gdansk it was believed that Wisłoujście had been bombed and defended heroically to the end. The noose around Stanislaus Leszczyński, however, tightened as the Russians reinforced their siege ring with siege cannons and bombed Gdansk more and more violently.

**Leszczyński suffered nightmares. Why had he let himself be so dazzled by the splendor of the royal crown? At night the faithless and prickly crown kept pestering him. The situation was so hopeless! Only God's help - or a trick - could help him now. The mayors of Gdansk also kept urging him to leave the city. But how and where? In his desperation, Leszczyński gave a farmer gold and exchanged his sumptuous velvet robes for coarse linen:**

**“Promise me to stroll through the city walls, clearly visible to friends and foes - to be king, at least for a day!”<sup>9</sup>**

Disguised as a farmer, Leszczyński left Gdansk at night and laboriously fled through the enemy lines to Kaliningrad<sup>10</sup>, where he sought the protection of the Prussian King. Now the proud city of Gdansk could finally surrender to the enemy with dignity.

The war in Poland was over. The Russian fleet left the Gdańsk Bay and drove back to Saint Petersburg. For the adventurer Stanislaus Leszczyński, life should now be more calm. He returned to France, was formally allowed to keep the title of king and received the duchies of Lorraine and Bar for his third exile.



King Stanislaus I escapes from besieged Danzig in disguise (etching by Daniel Chodowiecki, Berlin, 1796, British Museum CC BY-NC-SA 4.0, unchanged)

<sup>9</sup> Much later (1840), Giuseppe Verdi composed the opera "Un giorno di regno" ("King for a day"), which deals with Stanislaus Leszczyński's return to Poland in 1733.

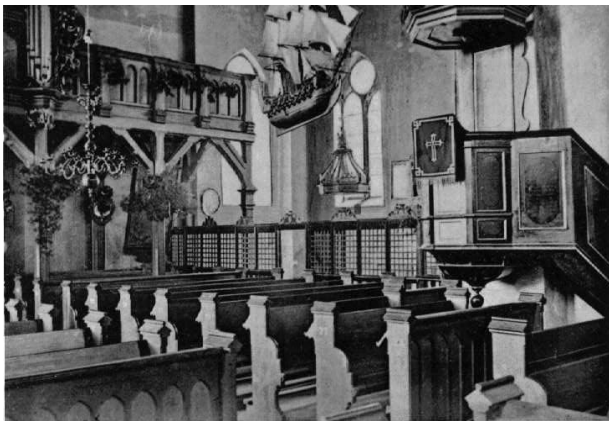
<sup>10</sup> German: Königsberg

*„Ei Gott! Tjick moahl, nu sailen se trichan noa huus. Dat es een scheenet Bild!“<sup>11</sup> A group of Hel fishermen watched the Russian ships, which were getting smaller and smaller on the horizon, with relief. Now they could easily turn to fishing for eels. However, Hans Becker was still plagued by his nightmares. Tired and tense, he got up every morning until he went to work. It wasn't that easy what he'd set out to do.*

His work on the model ship was to last for ten years. During this time there was peace and two more children were given to him by his wife. Hans Becker only converted to Lutheranism on his deathbed. A threatening Russian frigate became a small ship model, which was supposed to give the Hel fishermen families consolation and hope for 192 years and is now exhibited in the local fishery museum.



Stern of the Hel ship model of 1744 (Fishery Museum Hel)



Interior Church in Hel (ca.1930)



Swedish Flagship "Wachtmeister" in action against the Russian squadron in 1719 (oil painting Ludvig Richarde-Skeppet 1902, Wikimedia Commons public domain)

### Ship models and votive ships

Ship models in churches have a long tradition. Often they were donated for representative reasons. In catholic countries, however, predominate the religious motive, according to which "votive ships" have been donated as gifts of thanks for received rescue from emergency situations. The ship models were hung in the interiors of the churches and were viewed from below. Therefore, these ship models are not to scale: the rigging and cannons are often enlarged, the hull reduced.

The Hel ship model is possibly a votive ship and would therefore be an exception among the church ship models in the Baltic region. The Russian frigate "Wachtmeister" was probably the model, as a double-headed eagle and a rider are depicted on the stern. The "Wachtmeister" was captured from the Swedes in the Great Northern War. The Hel church ship model was considered lost for a long time after the Hel fishing families were expelled in 1936, but according to the Fisheries Museum in Hel it was kept in the Wawel Art Collection in Krakow until 1964 and then in the Maritime Museum in Gdansk. It only returned to the Hel Fishery Museum, the former St. Peter and Paul Church, in 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Low German spoken in Hel: „Oh my god! Look, now they're sailing back home. That is a beautiful picture!“

## Epilogue

At the time of the War of the Polish Succession in 1733-38, there was still no noticeably developed patriotism in Europe. This was only created after the French Revolution in 1789 and the Napoleonic Wars. It remains to be seen whether Stanislaus Leszczyński can actually be called a "gambler". William Makepeace Thackeray's novel "Barry Lyndon", which was later congenially filmed by Stanley Kubrik, possibly aptly described the opportunistic mentality of the people from this era. Stanislaus Leszczyński came from a widespread Polish aristocratic family and has Lithuanian, Belarusian and German ancestors. His great-grandfather, Rafal Leszczyński (1579-1636), was a Calvinist and leader of the Reformed in Poland. The half-brother of the latter, Waclaw, was Archbishop of Gniezno and Primate of the Catholic Church in Poland. Stanislaus Leszczyński himself was probably very tolerant in religious matters, which is why he strengthened the rights of the Lutherans and the Reformed against the Catholic Church after his first election in 1704. But his reign was only five years.



Interior of the Saint Peter and Paul Church in Hel (ca. 1935)

The donation of the model ship was not documented. The Calvinist Hans Becker from Karwenbruch can, however, be regarded with the greatest possible certainty as the builder and donator of the ship model.

It is quite possible that parts of the settlers in Karwieńskie Błota were Calvinist religious refugees from North Frisia and Holland.



The ship model in the church (ca. 1935)

The remains of Stanislaus Leszczyński and Hans Becker's model ship were to come very close two centuries later. The bones of Stanislaus I were exhumed in Lorraine in 1814, transferred to Poland and buried in the Wawel Cathedral in Krakow in 1938. Hans Becker's votive ship was placed in the Wawel's art collection at around the same time until it came to Gdansk in 1964.

The paragraphs in italics are fictions, the rest are based on facts. Hans Becker is a direct ancestor of one of the Hel Hobby Historians.

### List of References:

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