

Book excerpt · Between Two Worlds

Chapter 3: The Crossing



The Thames estuary and the Atlantic. Winter 1709 to summer 1710.

The ships lay at anchor, and the wind did not come.

There were ten of them. They lay in the Thames estuary, where the water widens and will no longer call itself a river but is not yet the sea. The ropes slapped against the masts when the tide turned — otherwise it was still.

It was January, then February. On some mornings ice lay on the rail. When the sun came, it melted in a narrow strip, and the water that ran off froze once more on the side of the hull before it reached the sea.

Conrad lay in the hold with his brothers and sisters. There were eight of them, pressed close together. His father counted the provisions in the morning and again in the afternoon. They were no longer enough for a crossing, only enough for the waiting for a crossing — and that was a difference the father did not speak.

The English came now and then with bread. It was not the bread the father had once baked. It was hard, sometimes greenish, and it had to be soaked in the water from the casks, which already had a taste whose origin Conrad could not identify. But it filled the stomach, and no one here asked for more.

Above them, on deck, the sailors walked back and forth and waited as well. They spoke in a language Conrad did not understand, but he had learned to hear from their tone what they were saying about the weather. When the tone was indifferent, the wind held off. When it grew angry, the wind held off all the more, because then a steersman had hoped, and the hope had not been fulfilled.

A gull sat for days on the same spar of the neighboring ship. Conrad saw her every morning when he was allowed on deck, and sometimes in the evening. He did not know whether it was always the same one, but he assumed it was, because that helped him. One morning in early February she was gone. Conrad thought, now the wind will come. But the wind did not come, and by evening the gull was back.

The father explained a great deal in those weeks, all that could be explained.

He explained that a ship of this size could carry about two hundred souls, and that on each of their ten ships there were far more. He explained that water was needed for four months, and that four months was a long time in which much could happen that one could not know in advance. He explained that the English had sent the Catholics away — back to Germany, with travel money, like unwanted goods — and that therefore on these ships there were only Protestants, which had already been the case in the camp on Blackheath, but now, in the narrow world of a ship's hold, became still more evident.

He explained once, while they stood on deck and looked west, in what direction they would travel. Conrad asked how far. The father said: farther than a man can imagine. Then he added: but men have gone farther still, and so shall we.

He explained what Queen Anne was, and why she paid the money for their passage, and what she expected in return. He explained the words *Naval Stores*, which he had heard from an English man in the camp. Tar, pitch, turpentine — what ships need in order to remain ships. That the English had until now bought it from Sweden and Russia, and that they hoped soon to get it from America, because there were forests there with the right kinds of trees. Conrad asked whether the Palatines would do that, this burning of tar. The father said: yes, probably. Then he said no more, and Conrad did not ask further.

Some things the father did not explain. He did not explain why the mother had died in May and why she was not here now, on board a ship bound for a land they all knew only from hearsay. He did not explain what would happen if the provisions ran out before the ship arrived. He did not explain what the gull meant that kept returning.

But Conrad was twelve, then thirteen — his birthday had been in November, before embarkation, and no one had marked it — and he had learned that a man does not explain everything, because a man does not know everything. He knew that from Großaspach, from the bakehouse. His father had explained dough, flour, oven, time. But the frost in December that had taken the vineyards — that he had not explained. The frost no one had explained.

Sometime in February — Conrad did not know the exact day — the wind came.

It came in the evening, and by morning the anchors were up and the sails were open. Conrad lay in the hold and felt the ship lift, felt it tip. It was no longer the ship that lay in the harbor. It was now a ship under way, and the going of a ship is not something a man learns — it is something that happens to him.

In the hold things grew close. When the sea was calm, it was bearable. When it was not calm, it was not. The buckets in the corners filled faster than they could be emptied. It smelled of vomit, of wet straw, of breath, of fear. Conrad knew that smell now.

They were on the *Herbert*. Conrad had heard the name a few times from the sailors, and he had kept it. There were ten ships, they sailed in convoy, sometimes one saw the lights of the others on the horizon, sometimes not. On one of them — on the *Lyon*, someone said, who claimed to know — sailed Robert Hunter, the new Governor of New York. He had his own cabin, it was said, and his own bed, and he was not sick. Conrad remembered that piece of information because it explained something about the world that he would only fully understand later: that even on the high seas, in the middle of the same water, people make different journeys.

The fever did not come all at once. It seeped in, the way the rumor had seeped into Großaspach more than half a year ago, a time that now looked like another life.

First someone coughed, further back. Then someone coughed in the next row. Then someone burned in his sleep, and his neighbors moved half an arm's length away, which did not help, because half an arm is no distance on a ship. Then the first one died.

It was a man whose name Conrad did not know. They wrapped him in the piece of linen the English had issued for such cases — issued sparingly, for they were sparing even here — and carried him on deck. Conrad followed, because he wanted to see how it was done. It went quickly. A few words, short, because the wind was too loud for long words, then the bundle tipped over the rail. The water made no sound. That was what Conrad remembered most exactly afterward: that the water made no sound when it took a man.

After that it went faster. Three the next day, five the day after. Then Conrad stopped counting, because counting changed nothing, and because his smallest sister began to cough, and he turned his ears inward, toward where his brothers and sisters lay, and no longer outward, where the bundles went.

There was no ship's doctor. There should have been one, a man had said who knew of such things. But for four thousand souls on ten ships there were not four thousand doctors, and so there was none for the *Herbert* either, and the Palatines nursed one another as best they could, which meant: not at all.

Pastor Kocherthal, who had written the Golden Book and who was sailing on one of the ships — which, Conrad did not know — spoke prayers over those who died. That had got around when the *Herbert* once passed close to another ship and words were shouted across. Conrad imagined how the pastor spoke: first over the first, then over the second, then over the third. How many words must a pastor have to be enough for so many dead.

In those weeks the father no longer explained anything.

He sat with the brothers and sisters, held the smallest sister's forehead, gave her water from the cask that now tasted worse than at the beginning. When Conrad sat beside him, he sometimes said something short — *drink* or *stay here* — but he no longer explained. He was a man who was thinking and who found nothing anymore that could be explained. Conrad saw that and said nothing either.

The sister survived. Others did not. One of Conrad's brothers — not the youngest, who would die the following winter, but one of the middle ones — took the fever and lay for three days. On the fourth day

he was on his feet again. By what logic such things happened, who went and who stayed, was not to be seen. Sometimes the fever took the strong and left the weak lying. Sometimes the other way around. There was no rule, and the absence of a rule is in such cases harder to bear than any strict rule.

Conrad himself did not fall sick. He did not know why, and he did not ask. One does not ask such questions aloud, not even in one's own head, because the asking might scare off the luck one secretly hopes is luck.

Later he wrote about these months in a single sentence:

"About Christmas day we embarked, and ten shiploads of about 4000 souls were sent to America."

What lay between Christmas and what was to come — the weeks in the harbor, the gull, the fever, the bundles over the rail, the sister, the brother, the father who no longer explained — he did not write down.

They were more than five months at sea. No one knew exactly how many days, because the counting had stopped. But it was spring, then early summer, and the air on deck grew warmer, and on some days one saw birds that were not gulls — smaller, with different flight paths, which meant, a sailor said, that land was nearer than one thought.

In early June — it must have been early June, for the days were long and the light held deep into the evening — the storm came.

It came out of the northeast and pushed the *Herbert* ahead of itself the way a hand pushes a leaf. Conrad heard the creaking of the wood, which he had heard before on occasion but never like this. He heard the shouting of the sailors, which no longer sounded like a foreign language but like the language all men speak when they are afraid. He heard the water coming into the ship — first in drops in places where water had not been before, then streaming.

In the hold it grew dark. The hatches were shut, but the water found its ways. The father held the younger children, three in one arm, three in the other, the seventh and eighth clung to his legs. Conrad had his hands free, because he was the eldest, and an eldest needs his hands. He did not know what for, but he knew that was how it was.

What came then was not one thing but many things at once. The ship laid over on one side, further than it had ever laid. It stayed there one breath too long. It did not right itself again. Water now came through the hatches, not through cracks. Voices shouted that one had to get on deck, and other voices shouted that it was not possible. Conrad saw his father stand up with the children and force his way against the stream of people upward. Conrad followed.

On deck another ship was visible. It was close — too close, Conrad thought at first, they will smash each other, one against the other — but it was not by chance that it was close. It had come near because the *Herbert* had called out, with flags, with torches, with the means a ship has when it knows it will not be a ship much longer.

It was called the *Midford*. Conrad heard the name later, in the days after, and kept it, because it was the one that took them all on.

How one crossed from the *Herbert* to the *Midford* that night was not a thing Conrad remembered clearly afterward. There were hands — hands that gripped, hands that pulled, hands that lifted a child up and took another child down. There was water, always in between, black and cold, which did not splash but swallowed. There was shouting that stopped, and silence that came when someone no longer shouted.

The Weiser family came across whole to the *Midford*. Eight children and the father. Conrad counted them as they sat on the new side of a hull, soaked to the skin, shivering. Eight and one. No one was missing.

The *Herbert* he did not see go down. It was too dark, and the *Midford* had already turned away to take on others. But later, the next morning, when the sea had quieted and the light came, Conrad's eyes searched for her and did not find her. Where she had lain, there was only water, and the water was calm, as though it had swallowed nothing.

They anchored on July 7 off New York City.

It was a bright day, and Conrad stood on deck and saw land. It was the first land he had seen since he had looked, as a child, at the hill behind Großaspach, which had seemed large to him then and which he could now no longer exactly remember. This land here was different. It was flat at the water, then trees rose, then more trees, then still more. He had never seen so much forest at one time.

Other ships lay already before the harbor, at anchor, some for weeks. The *Lyon* — Hunter was long since ashore — and three or four others. Conrad no longer knew afterward which they had been. He knew that they arrived as seven or eight out of ten. Two were no longer there. One of them was the *Herbert*, whose people were now standing on the *Midford* or lying at the bottom of the North Sea, depending on how the night of the storm had gone for each of them.

The men in boats who came to the *Midford* let no one ashore. They spoke with the captain, they pointed to the hold, they shook their heads. Conrad did not understand the little English he had picked up on Blackheath well enough to follow the content, but he understood the shaking of heads. It meant: not here. Not yet.

A small island in the harbor was pointed out. The Palatines were to be taken there, it was said, until the sickness was past. The sickness that had come with them across the sea was not to enter the city. The city protected itself, as cities do.

Conrad saw the island, small and low, with a few buildings run up in haste. It was called Nutten Island. Later it would bear another name, but Conrad did not know that, and it did not matter. What mattered was: the voyage was over, and yet it was not over, for before them lay still more water, short water now but water, and on the other side of it an island, and on the island they would remain until someone decided that they might go further.

The father stood beside Conrad on deck. He said nothing for a long time. Then he said only: *We are here.*

Conrad nodded. He was thirteen years old, and he had learned to nod when a man no longer explains.

Behind them lay the sea, which had taken what it wanted to take. Before them lay a small island with huts, and behind that the city, and behind that a river, and behind that forests of which they yet knew nothing.

The Golden Book had promised land. It had not said how far away that land would be, even when one had already arrived.

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Next: Chapter 4 — What Remains

The complete book: *Between Two Worlds — Conrad Weiser 1696–1760* by Andreas Paul John.

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