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The Joint Archives *Quarterly*

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Summer 2002

Sabotage at Sea: Holland Natives' Fiery Ordeal

by Michael J. Douma

It was April of 1961 and the time for their children's graduation had finally arrived. Holland, Michigan natives, Rose and Gerald Nykerk were on their way from the mission hospital where they worked in Bahrain to their children's school in India. In the port at Bahrain they met up with their friends, Mr. and Mrs. Dorsch, the owners of the Bahrain Oil Company, who were saying goodbye and heading home for the last time. In the pounding heat of the Persian Gulf, Rose recalls a smattering of ethnicities (Pakistanis, Indians, Arabs, Iranians, Europeans) all boarding the ship and embarking on a voyage. It was only one day into the journey when the trouble began.

While a violent storm brewed in the Persian Gulf, the *Dara*, a British-owned and operated 382-foot passenger ship, left its port in Bahrain. Destined for Bombay via Muscat, the overloaded *Dara* battled the waves and collided with the Panamanian steamer *Zeus*. The damage was assessed as merely superficial. The *Dara's* captain decided to avoid the risk of another shipping lane accident by heading out to sea. Nevertheless, a few hours later, at 4:40 in the morning, an explosion rocked the ship.

Gerald said, "Rose was up in a flash and stepped into my cabin as I was getting up. She thought we had been hit by another ship. Then we heard moans and groans of people below us and the cry of 'Fire!'"¹

The real danger to the ship may not have been on the outside, but already on board. British interests and control in the Middle East were strong in the decades following the Second World

War. In Oman, the British-supported sultan faced the insurgence of a rebel faction which was just beginning what was to be nearly a thirteen year war. From 1959 to 1962, security had been increased on British ships in the area after numerous attacks were made on the lives of British sailors. In reference to the *Dara*, British Solicitor General John Hobson later declared that Omani rebels had committed a "deliberate and wicked act of sabotage."² It was thought by

many that an anti-tank bomb had been placed in the ship. When the ship was unable to unload passengers due to the weather, the Omani terrorists on board became victims of their own time bomb.

Rose adds, "They (the captains) were afraid they'd be hit again because

they didn't have control so they went back out. But by that time the people, the ones who were going to knock the ship out of condition, were on board. So they suffered too."

This explanation was not universally accepted. Some questioned why Arabs would attack a ship with other Arabs on board and with no prominent political figures. The bomb hypothesis is often labeled pure rumor. To this day, the cause of the explosion of the *Dara* is officially inconclusive and remains a mystery.

The effects of the explosion, however, were undeniable. The electricity immediately went out, and the generator emergency lights soon failed as smoke filled the cabins. In the darkness,



(Continued on page 2)

From the Director

I hope all of you are enjoying the extra warm and humid summer. While many of you might like this sort of weather, I, on the other hand, will stay put right here in the archives where the "weather" is a constant 70 degrees Fahrenheit with low humidity. Just the way I like it.

The last few months have been busy for us at the archives. In addition to abnormally high research activity, we have had the pleasure of hosting a visiting scholar from Japan. Naoto Tsuji, Researcher of Archives and History from Meiji Gakuin was here researching the connections between Hope College and Meiji Gakuin, as well as Hope's Japanese graduates and their impact in Japan once they returned home in the late 19th century.

This issue of the *Quarterly* is comprised of an interesting article on Reformed Church in America missionaries and Holland natives Rose and Gerald Nykerk. The article was written by one of our research assistants, Michael Douma, after he finished processing Rose's papers. He became so interested in her life and the near death experience aboard the ill-fated passenger liner, *Dara*, that he just had to write something for our readers. I know you will enjoy it as much as Michael did researching and writing it.

When this issue reaches your mailboxes we will be saying goodbye, temporarily that is, to our two summer archival assistants. Michael Douma and Matthew Nickel will be spending the fall semester studying in the Netherlands and Oregon. We wish them well and have been promised that they will be back for the winter semester. I plan to hold them to that promise.

Please take a moment to review the Holland Area Historical Society insert included in this issue. I think you will agree that there are some new and exciting events and programs in the upcoming year. If you're not already a member, please consider joining. Through your membership and attendance, the society becomes stronger and attractive to potential speakers. As the summer draws to a close, I look forward to seeing many of you at the society's upcoming events and programs.

Geoffrey Reynolds

The Sinking of the Dara (continued from page 1)

fear and chaos ensued. High winds fed the rapidly spreading fire, while the hallways turned into wind tunnels. Many died as the breathable air was sucked out of their rooms by the raging fire.

The main deck became flooded with people as pandemonium broke out. Rose recalls, "The ship was unusual. It had a whole deck just for the passengers who had no room, and they didn't even have money to get a room. They were mostly Indian people that were going back to India. A lot of Indians worked in those stations down in the Gulf." Other more well-to-do Indians and Arabs began moving to the main deck to avoid the smoke and fire.

Down in the rooms, Rose recalls an Arab woman crying "amin bi allah" (roughly translated: I believe in Allah) over and over. This woman had three children and could not get them dressed in time due to the darkness.

Gerald Nykerk grabbed some papers, including their passports, and the Nykerks scurried to the top deck. An officer ran by, promising that the fire would soon be out. But this was to no avail. Flames on the starboard side of the ship illuminated the dark night. The English crew was nowhere to be found and the passengers waited for someone to take charge.

Gerald located the lifejackets and began passing them out. Then he and one crew member struggled to release a lifeboat. The hesitant Indian passengers refused to be the first in the water and Rose made her way down into the boat. But the boat failed to launch and Rose was left swinging on the rope. Rose says, "When it went only part way I had to come back up; they had to reach down and pull me back up." The Nykerk's managed to locate and utilize a second lifeboat. Safely onboard, they helped pull others from the lashing waves into the tossed-about craft. Up to twenty-five people herded into the small boat. One officer nearly killed someone as he jumped twenty-five feet into the lifeboat. Some people fell into the shark-infested sea and clutched onto what they could, while others huddled together onboard the *Dara*.

An S.O.S was never made, but after an hour and a half, other ships, that had seen the flames from miles distant, began rescue attempts. The fire was met with a barrage of water hoses, but it lingered on. Over five hundred people remained alive on the smoldering hulk of the *Dara* until they were hoisted into rescue ships. An attempt was made to haul the evacuated *Dara* back to port, but the iron carcass rolled over and sank to the ocean floor where it remains an obstacle for shipping to this day.

As soon as the Nykerks were stable on a rescue ship, the *British Energy*, they began aiding victims. Gerald Nykerk, who was a missionary doctor, worked on patients, many critical, until the next day. Rose provided medical assistance as she had done in the Arabian Mission hospitals.



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*The Nykerk family: Gerald and Rose,
Nancy, Laila, and David*

Gerald and Rose had survived, but the news reaching their children in India was pessimistic. Early reports told of no survivors, and when it was learned that Dr. Nykerk was performing medical work on the rescue ship, it was assumed that Rose had perished. Reports of the tragedy appeared worldwide. Eventually the good news of the missionaries' survival reached India. Others, however, were less fortunate. The American friends of the Nykerks, the Dorsches, never made it out of their first class room. An Indian nurse who worked with the Nykerks in Bahrain also failed to survive when her lifeboat capsized.

The Nykerks had lost all personal possessions, but were happy to have escaped with their lives. Natives of Bahrain, and members of the Holland (Michigan) community, specifically First Reformed Church, provided them with clothes and financial aid.

Rose remembers, "Well, we had nothing you know. I didn't have anything and all the people in Bahrain started coming, bringing me things so I'd have something wear. It was no joke, but we were so glad to be alive. We didn't mind that it was a bad situation. We finally got to Holland, the Holland people gave us some clothes or gave us money too so we could get something."

The next year Rose attended a formal investigation in London to address what happened on the day the of the *Dara's* demise. All of her expenses were paid to provide testimony to the court in London.

Rose remembers, "Yes, I gave testimony. And I said about the luggage and stuff, and said it was overloaded because all these people on the deck were just carrying big packages for everything they were bringing back to India. And then he (the court official) said, 'Do you think you contributed something to the congestion here?' Because our kids were going to be graduated from high school in India, I had dresses for the girls, everything. So maybe I did contribute somewhat to the congestion, but I didn't realize it."

At the inquiry, a Pakistani man, Mr. Abdul Jabbar Qureshi, charged the crew with discrimination in handing out lifejackets, general disorganization, misguidance, and failure to properly alert the passengers. Though many people received slight compensation for their lost luggage, the court failed to convict the shipping line of any negligence as their tickets read, "passengers are carried at their own risk, as also is their baggage." When it was all said and done, two hundred thirty-eight persons lost their lives including twenty-four members of the crew.



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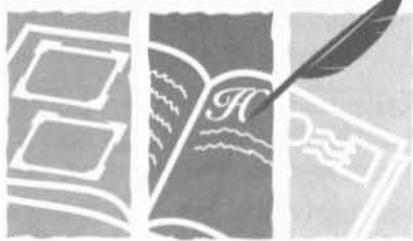
Rose on one of her return trips to Arabia after retirement

Undeterred, the Nykerks soon returned to the Arabian mission field. Though her husband died in Kuwait in 1964, Rose continued to work as an administrator in the Bahrain hospital for eleven more years. Rose, an expert on Middle Eastern affairs, gave speeches during the Gulf War in 1990 and presently lives in California. She is saddened by the present situation in the Middle East. She says, "The way the situation is now, it is very hard for me to live through because they were all such close friends of ours, and they were all Muslim. I sit and watch that TV and I can't believe what I hear. It was just a different situation entirely. I mean, it's changed so much because of that 9/11. You can't even picture how it was before. They all loved America."

Footnotes

¹ Newspaper Article, Missionary Describes Long Night of Terror on Ship

² Lloyd's List and Shipping Gazette, Tuesday, March 20th, 1962



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Gerald and Rose on their rescue ship, the British Energy

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