A High Seas Dutch War Crime . . .

This article is about a nearly unknown and shameful war crime by an ostensibly “neutral” country in World War II, in which Catholic missionaries and others were left to drown due to their ethnicity.

Translated by Peter Strahl

Sumatra is of course a large island in western Indonesia. From 1903 up until World War II, it was occupied by the Netherlands. With the outbreak of the war, German and Austrian citizens [and ethnically German people even though they were Dutch citizens—Ed.] who lived on the island were taken into captivity as prisoners of war by the Dutch. But then the Japanese, who were about to occupy the island, were advancing.

Consequently, the Dutch prepared to bring their prisoners out of the country. Among them were 18 Catholic Steylers—Society of the Divine Word. One of them was Brother Aloysius Seitz.

They were brought aboard the Dutch ship MV Van Imhoff. There were altogether 500 “German” and “Austrian” prisoners of war. Two-thirds of the prisoners were crammed into the ‘tween-deck, only a yard high. The prisoners could therefore not stand upright. Over 100 were locked in a cage on the foredeck. Br. Aloysius gave an account later of the unbearable heat and bestial stench on board.

It was on the third day of the journey, about midday of January 19, 1942, when the ship was attacked by a Japanese bomber off the coast of Indonesia. Panic broke out. The ship began to sink. The POWs hardly had a chance.

Contrary to the customs of the navy and merchant marine, the captain was the first who, with his officers, climbed into the lifeboat. It was able to accept 60 persons, but only 20 places were taken. A portion of the prisoners were able to save themselves because a sergeant threw them the key to their kennels. Br. Aloysius reached the single remaining lifeboat by swimming. The Van Imhoff sank in a mighty whirlpool and dragged hundreds to their deaths. The few that were still alive were helplessly floundering in the sea.

A short time later, survivors were sighted by a Dutch ship, the Boulangan. The ship came near. The captain of the Boulangan inquired as to the ethnicity of the occupants of the lifeboat. When he heard that they were Germanic, he turned about. Likewise, an airplane of the Dutch navy sent no rescue. Finally, on the third day, [roughly 66] of the survivors managed by their own power to reach the island of Nias, about 60 miles west of Sumatra.

The balance sheet: 412 of the 478 Germans on the Van Imhoff lost their lives in the catastrophe. Br. Aloysius was the only one who survived of the 18 Steyler missionaries on board.

Father Helmut Thometzki is today the executive director of the business affairs of the Steyler Missions. In the year 1970, he came to know Br. Aloysius, when the Steyler Missionaries were building a print shop on the island of Timor. To the news service of the Steyler missionaries he said, “Brother Aloysius Seitz was a peaceful man.” He needed years, in order to work through the events. But, “although he had horrible things behind him, he was not embittered.” In the evenings, after work was completed, the two missionaries would often converse.

“He himself never actually began it,” recalls Fr. Thometzki. “But when we were by ourselves, then indeed he had some things to tell.”

In the Netherlands, the events surrounding the sinking of the Van Imhoff were long a taboo topic. They were suppressed until well into the 1960s and 70s. In the late ’60s, it came to a lawsuit, which a survivor from Germany had brought; but the Dutch court authorities saw no basis for an indictment. The proceedings were delayed; and the investigations were discontinued.

To this day, no atonement has been made for the events of that time. Br. Aloysius died in the year 1994, at age 85.

ENDNOTE:

1 The Society of the Divine Word (Latin: Societas Verbi Divini, abbreviated SVD), popularly called the Divine Word Missionaries, and sometimes the Steyler Missionaries, is a missionary religious congregation in the Latin Church, one of the 23 “autonomous” or “particular” churches that make up the Catholic Church.

Original source: From Kreuz.net, Jan. 19, 2012