

# AGAINST THE WAVES

DARIA GATSKA

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BACHELOR'S THESIS  
BACHELOR OF ARTS AND CULTURE  
NOVIA UAS

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"So this is my mail box... Everything is fine here. Lots of information these days. Now I need to digest, and tomorrow I start to stand a watch on a bridge",

this was the very first email I got from Guillaume when he started working on Marfret Guyane as a Third Officer in September 2018. It was totally different from the yacht world, where he used to work before: strict schedule, captain's orders, no internet on board (so no face time or whatsapp messages, only emails).

"I will stand a watch between 8am-12pm and 8pm-12am. When we cross the Atlantic, it will be between 4am-8am and 4pm-8pm..."







"In the team we have more Ukrainians than French. There are also Filipinos in the deck team. I feel friendly atmosphere here. I do my job and the spirit of the crew is good. They don't complain and try to do their best... I spoke a lot with the second captain and the guy really loves his job."

During my visit there were 6 Filipinos, 10 Ukrainians, 3 French and 1 Lithuanian onboard. Filipinos who work mostly as able seamen and stay for the longer service period of up to 7-9 months, Ukrainians working in the engine department serve up to 4-5 months at a time and French or Lithuanians holding positions as officers usually stay for the shortest term of 3 months.









"My day was crazy! Non stop! This morning I had a watch from 4am to 8am, during which I prepared a safety tour for the morning, filled the papers etc. Breakfast quickly after, and already at 8:30am started the safety tour with a cadet and finished almost at 11am. The small break speaking with a captain on the bridge. 12pm is lunch time and after just a short nap. I did also a bit of sport; we have an elliptic bike and a rowing machine in the gym. And at 4pm started again my watch which was special because we did fire and abandon drill. After I needed to write all the reports and finally at 8pm, after the watch, I could get my dinner. Soon going to sleep before starting again tomorrow at 3:30am. It is a crazy life on a cargo vessel, but I like it!"

The most important thing to add is that they do not have days off there; it means they sometimes need to work in such mode several days in a row. When it comes to cargo operations during the North passage, then the schedule is even more intense and sleepless night are guaranteed.



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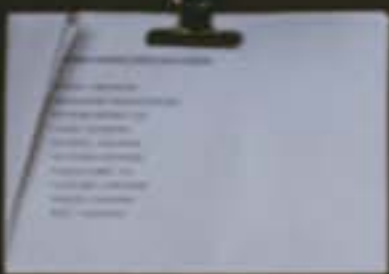
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Fuel in use

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"To answer your question why a guy wants to be a seaman...probably because he got an adventure spirit. He likes to travel, discover the world and meet new people, to live life enjoying everything that can be enjoyable. What I like in this job is that it is never routine. You know me, I could never work in the office and do the same job."

Well, that is not true of all of them. Some seamen frankly told me that they were there for the money. For example, in Ukraine or the Philippines it is not easy even for the well-educated to earn the same salary in their own country.







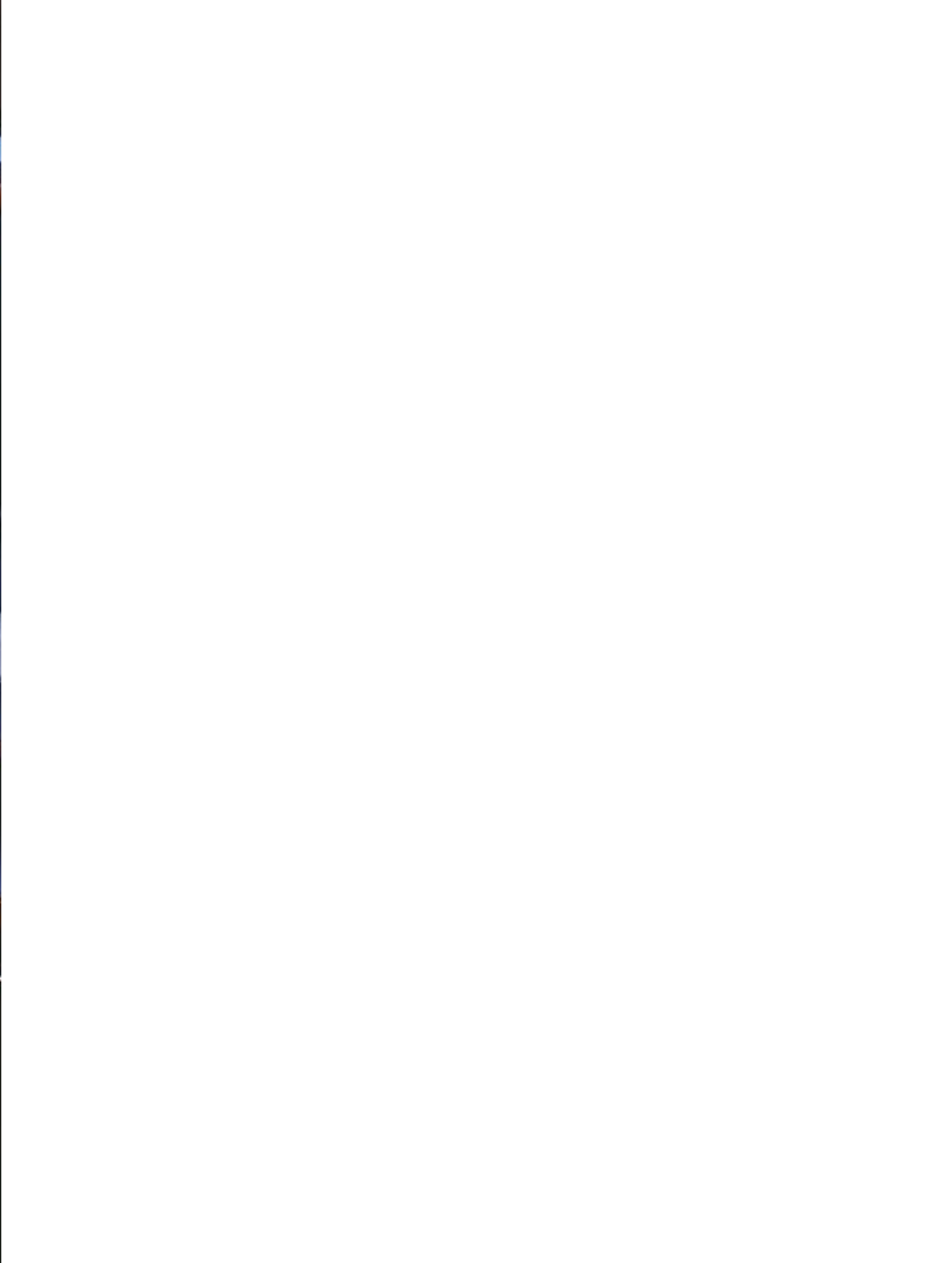


Not too much sleep tonight. I haven't received any email for 32 hours. Probably bad synchronization, again. Guillaume warned me that they were expecting a storm. I checked some resources providing detailed marine traffic information, but the last report was from two days ago. Then finally I received this:

"We are in the middle of the storm since yesterday. Lightning everywhere, I think we took one on the bridge because the wiper started to work by itself. We also had some other issues with electronic charts this night. Luckily we still use a paper chart. Also we took a big wind gust up to 80 km per hour with heavy rain."

They also faced another storm: "Waves up to 6-7 meters. Looks impressive! I just received a report saying that there is a capsized vessel 90 nautical miles away from us. Probably a sailing boat from the race Route du Rhum."

..."Now we start to increase speed and the storm starts to calm down. It was really hard those days, you can only sit or lie down as it's very hard to stand without falling... It's really a fight and so many days like this, it starts to be long..."







"On one side, we feel freedom at sea, however on another side, we are stuck and isolated in a small space. This job is not easy and there is a risk to finish this job being alone because everyone ashore might forget about you. A seaman is far from the family for a long time. Life onboard is very strict and you are always under pressure.. It is really different from that life when you go home after work."

Feeling isolated is the most common issue, especially for those just starting at the job. They realize that they need to stay onboard during all circumstances; they cannot escape or take a day off when they want. And as some of mariners confirmed, panic attacks are a side effect of the job as well.



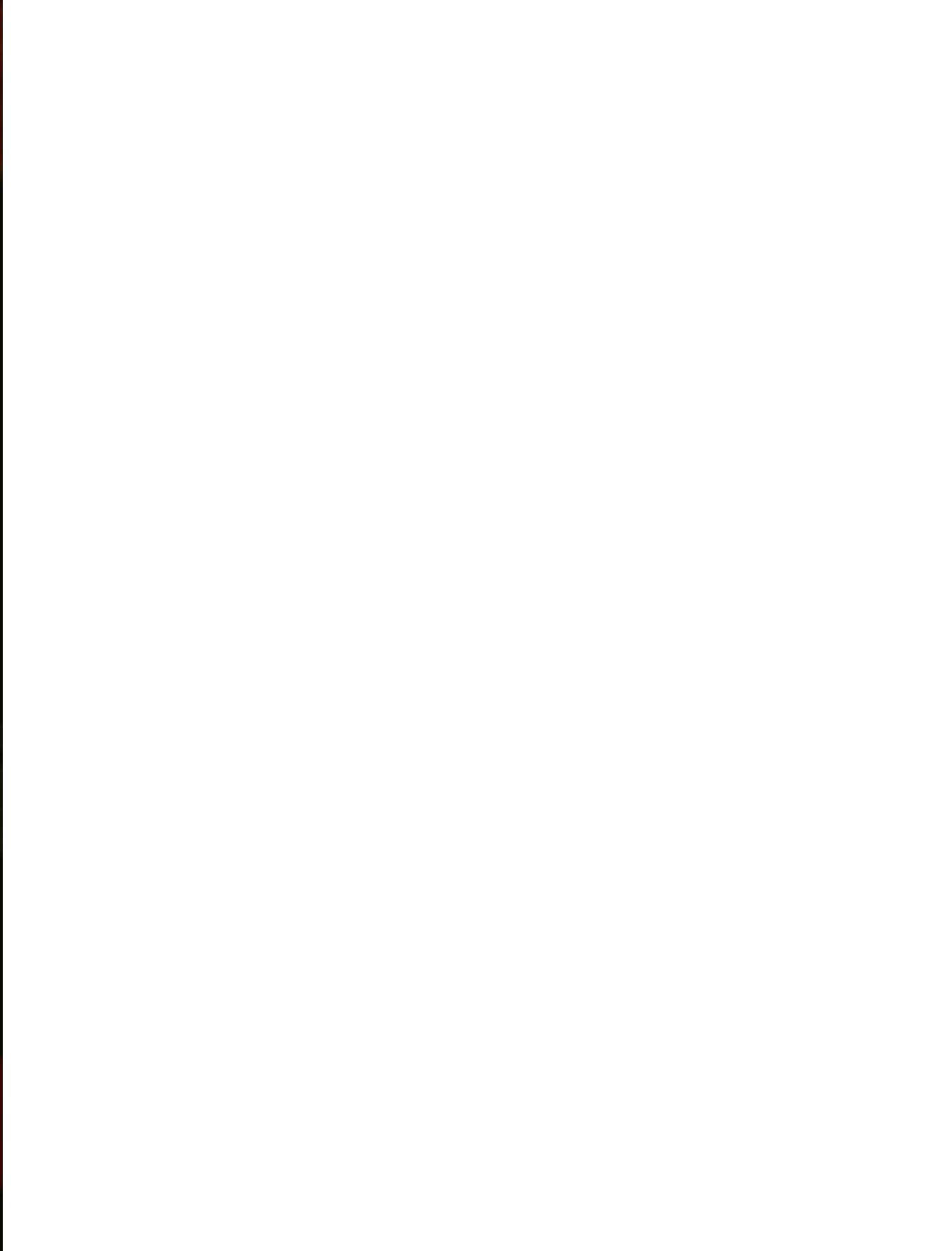






"We had an apero with a bottle of Champagne for only three French remaning onboard. It was a really nice moment with the sea calm like a lake and a beautiful sunset. I said that I knew a photographer who would have loved to be here..."







"Tomorrow I should get closer to the coast. If I am lucky, I will get some internet on my phone and can call you. Let's cross the fingers. I am just feeling so bad these days.

I am not the only one, after 8 days our passanger started to cry today. It is his first time being far from his wife for such long time. Probably that is why the sea is salted. Cause of seamen's tears."







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BACHELOR'S THESIS

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NOVIA UAS

Jakobstad 2020

BACHELOR'S THESIS

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## Abstract

In my thesis *Against the Waves*, I tell a narrative about seamen working on a French cargo vessel using photography.

In the same way as a movie has a storytelling part, it is also possible to tell the whole story through photography. In the current thesis, the visual story is also combined with emails I got from a French mariner, Guillaume, during more than a year. The aim of this work is to discover the world of modern seamen and bring it to the awareness of the viewer.

As a photographer, I kept my own style of creating a cinematic look searching for and/or creating the most suitable lighting, scouting for the right location and picking the right person for that look. I also used my communication

skills to make the models feel comfortable and safe in front of a camera.

In the theory part, I describe how the idea of the project was developed and how my project trips on board the *Marfret Guyane* went; I also include my observations and the mariners' stories in order to give picture of their life on-board.

The results of the project will be presented in the exhibitions; the photo book is going to be used as a portfolio for marketing of my work, for selling the pictures to magazines and in order to continue working on similar projects in the future.

Language: English

Keywords: seaman, merchant navy, cargo vessel, spirit of adventure, photography, portraiture, photo journalism, documentary, storytelling, cinematic lighting

## E X A M E N S A R B E T E

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### Abstrakt

I mitt examensarbete Against the Waves berättar jag genom fotografi om sjömän som arbetar på ett franskt lastfartyg. På samma sätt som en film är ett narrativ, är det också möjligt

att berätta en hel historia genom fotografi. I det aktuella examensarbetet kombineras den visuella berättelsen också med e-postmeddelanden jag fick från en fransk sjöman, Guillaume, under mer än ett år. Syftet med detta arbete är att upptäcka de moderna sjömännens värld och göra betraktaren uppmärksam på den världen.

Som fotograf har jag valt att skapa en filmatisk stil och leta efter och/eller skapa den mest lämpliga ljussättningen, leta efter rätt plats och välja rätt person för den stilen. Jag använder också mina kommunikativa kompetenser för att

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## INTRODUCTION

“A ship in port is safe. But that’s what not  
ships are built for”

John A. Shedd

I consider my lifestyle as nomadic, because I move and change places relatively often: first I moved to a new country with my family, later by myself following my dreams and searching for better living conditions. I guess it is a natural instinct to wish for comfort and protection and search for a better place. However, I am also one of those persons who like redecorating as if in a movie. Also, I like to travel to new countries, find open-minded people and have conversations about life and art and everything that makes us dive deeper into personalities. I like to see the real emotions and feel the person through photography. Books are not enough to answer all my questions which is why I prefer traveling and having eye contact with people living and working under different circumstances, to learn about their ways of life.

When I started this project, I wanted to discover the world of modern seamen, those who work with international trade, who travel around the world in order to transport goods from one continent to another taking risks and going through many challenges such as working for months without having days off, being stressed during cargo operations and

suffering from lack of sleep and loads of work, being isolated on a ship with a small crew, feeling homesick etc. When one sees this life, the following questions arise: if these seamen are aware of all the risks, why do they even choose this job? Do they do it because they love adventure or because of money? What is their comfort zone: at sea or at home? etc.

These questions which surfaced when reading Guillaume's emails and listening to his stories brought me to the idea of coming aboard the ship, doing portraits of those heroes and speaking to the mariners he was working with.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE IDEA

“It is better to see something ones than to  
hear about it a thousand times ”

Asian proverb

At the beginning of our email exchange with Guillaume, he once mentioned that if I really wanted to discover the modern world of a seaman with my own eyes, I could visit the ship for a few days. The idea sounded appealing to me as it was something new to learn about. Thus in December 2018 I embarked the vessel French Guyane in Rotterdam, Holland and the plan was to disembark in Le Havre, France in 2-3 days. I did not really know what to expect from this trip, how to behave among 20 seamen onboard, what to do if I was going to be seasick etc., but I was super excited.

During the trip I definitely saw a world which was very unusual for me. The strict discipline and schedule resembled military life. Each crew member is a part of a well-working machine. Everyone has their own responsibilities, and if one “part” is destroyed, removed or not functioning well, it will drag the whole machinery down.

Seamen do not have days off; they work for several months non-stop. Officers and able seamen have both day and night shifts. When crossing the Atlantic Ocean, they lose many hours of sleep because of changing time zones. Also, when arriving to the harbors, they might work more hours, because

containers must be reloaded, the ship has to be fueled, food must be ordered and delivered. The company has to pay for the time the vessel stays in the harbor which is why it is so important for them to work as fast as possible.

## MY TRIPS ON THE SHIP

First visit (19-21th Dec 2018): Rotterdam, Holland. I arrived early morning to the harbor. At the entrance, my passport was checked carefully and a terminal taxi brought me straight to the ship. Before entering the boat, I got a helmet as safety is really important aboard; then my name was registered again in a guest book, only after all those procedures they let me in.

After the cargo operations were finished, Guillaume gave me an introduction tour around the boat. Although the vessel looked huge from outside, it felt less spacious inside when passing through narrow corridors and staircases. The same with the cabins, although the size depends on the ranking. In case of a cadet, the room is really tiny with one small bed, but a chief mate or chief engineer gets a bigger room with two windows, a double bed, a table with a computer as the cabin can also serve as an office for them. There is no elevator inside, so one has to climb up and down many times a day which means a mariner needs to be in good shape. To be honest, I sometimes felt dizzy after running up to the bridge and then down to a deck a few times especially when the sea was not calm. Every deck is named with a letter: for example, A for the hospital and gymnasium, B for the crew's mess and recreation room, galley as well as the officers' mess room, C for rooms for cadets and able seamen etc. All together there are eight floors.

As Guillaume was a third officer at the time, he was re-

sponsible for safety onboard. He gave me instructions on what to do in case of fire or pirate attack as well as in case the ship would have to be abandoned. He even showed me where the passenger's place is in a lifeboat. That's when I started to realize how challenging and even risky the job might be. When crossing the Atlantic Ocean, there are no islands in sight for several days. The crew rely totally on themselves. If there is an accident and someone needs urgent medical help, the third officer needs to perform a surgery following the instructions of a doctor calling via satellite; or if the person can wait for the closest inhabited place, they will arrange a helicopter which brings the patient to the hospital. If a fire breaks out in the engine room, the crew need to stay focused and strong to be able to put out the fire and save the lives of anyone aboard. This all means that the job of a seaman combines a number of different professions. It also made me wonder if we who live ashore and consume goods transported by these mariners really realize the price of the job they are doing?

The first visit was really short and for me it was the trigger to do a whole project about these people onboard and tell their stories. Now when I had scouted a location, I could start preparing the project plan.

What I did next was to discuss with the company if I could come for the whole round trip Le Havre - Philipsburg - Port of Spain - Degrade des Cannes - Vila do Conde - Fortaleza - Natal - Algericas - London - Rotterdam - Le Havre, which

would take 42 days and would definitely give me a chance to get closer to the crew, spend more time with them at sea, cross the Atlantic Ocean and get that feeling of being far from the shore. Unfortunately, the company did not agree with my request. Although they have a room for a passenger and even if they are used to having artists and writers aboard, they took my gender into account. They made it clear that they didn't want the male crew to be distracted by a female presence. However, they offered an alternative: to come for one week during the North passage: Algericas (Spain) - London (England) - Rotterdam (Holland) - Le Havre (France). They usually allow wives and girlfriends of seamen to come onboard the ship during this passage once a year. They made an exception for me: I could come twice, which meant a one-week trip in August and another week during another trip in September-October. As it was the only option, I had to accept it.

Second visit (20th-27th Aug 2019): Algeciras, Spain. This time the crew were actually informed that there would be a photographer onboard, but I can tell that they were not so open to being in photos and telling me about their lives at the beginning. It took me a while to gain their trust so that they would say more than just 'Hello!' to me. Quite often sitting at a table, I tried to raise some questions, for example, whether they liked the food and living conditions onboard, what they did on their free time etc., but it was only the captain or chief

engineer answering while others continued to eat. Actually, it also depended on the nationality; the French were more open than the Ukrainians. Thus, it could be a cultural thing, or a side effect of the job hierarchy, especially among the Ukrainians as they respect the word of the higher-ranking person. The fact that they are more isolated and thus, less talkative, probably plays a part, too. Just for clarification, most of the Ukrainians work in the engine room, so they actually literally stay for hours in an enclosed space with lots of noise, protecting their ears with headsets, and the heat from the engine and not seeing the sea as much as the seamen working on the deck or the officers from the bridge. The noise and vibrations from the working engine make them quite tired, and when they need to work on something together, they use signs or gestures to explain what should be done.

As one of the young Ukrainian seamen (he asked me not to mention his name) later told me, he got strong panic attacks at the beginning of his career because he was afraid that if something happened to him, like losing consciousness due to the heat or accidentally falling down, for example, nobody would see or hear him and as a result he would die. As he started having more frequent nightmares, he needed medical consultation during a trip. He also confessed that he did not choose the profession of a seaman because it was his dream, far from it, but because it was an opportunity to earn money for the family. At that time, he had a wife and a kid. After he

discovered how hard the job was mentally, he started thinking about changing profession, but again, in Ukraine it is not that easy to find a well-paid job. Unfortunately, all the issues finally resulted in a divorce; it took him time to get back to the sea life.

Another time, I talked to a young able seaman, Renante, from the Philippines, who at the time was preparing a ladder for a pilot coming on the boat to take the ship out of the harbor. He too had chosen the profession because of money. He explained that the salary levels in his country are so low that it is impossible to support a family. This is probably the reason why the Philippines are nowadays one of the biggest suppliers of ratings after China, Indonesia, the Russian Federation and Ukraine (International chamber of shipping, n.d.). During my trip, on this particular ship, there were 6 Filipinos, 10 Ukrainians, 3 French and 1 Lithuanian.

I noticed that the Filipinos mostly have the job of ordinary seamen, while the French hold positions as officers and/or a captain. In fact, if one plans to become an officer, they need to get a Merchant Marine Credential (MMC) from a merchant marine academy. The education takes at least 4 years. To be an ordinary seaman, one needs to do a training between 6 months - 1 year (Zippia, n.d.) Most Filipinos choose the second option because they do not have enough time and money to invest in studies at the academy. Thus, the French are ranked high as they usually have the required education

and the demanded skills and knowledge to work with navigation equipment. However, the interest in being a seaman in the developed countries is decreasing.

The only person of Ukrainian nationality, Volodymyr, who worked as a bosun on the boat did not so because of the money, but because of his passion to the profession and to the sea. He started the job for more than 30 years ago in the Soviet Union, as it was then. Whenever he spoke, I could always feel a special admiration for the sea, travelling, and discovering new places . He had unforgettable memories from his previous trips from Martinique, the Dominican Republic in the Caribbean or Africa and Australia. When the ship stays longer in the harbor, he never loses a chance to go ashore for a walk, trying local food and buying traditional souvenirs. He described me his collection of souvenirs at home. The only thing he really misses onboard is having a real friend. That is the biggest issue for a seaman: as the crew is never the same, they cannot build enduring friendships. This often makes them feel alone. As he said, “not everyone can understand your jokes or discuss a book with you like a real friend”. That is why he spends most of his free time onboard with an electronic book.

Once I came to the galley to take some pictures of the cook Jose, originally from the Philippines. I was wondering how he manages to keep a generous smile on his face while being stuck on the boat every day. He was almost the same age as the bosun. When he started as a cook 30 years ago

there were no educational requirements. He just spent several months as a trainee after which he could work on the vessel. Even if he is the one who cannot leave the boat to go ashore – as the food is always served at a particular time - he never complains because he knows that this job brings money and his family can have a better life. However, there are also circumstances one cannot predict like losing a family member when being far away from home. When he was about to leave home for a 7- month-contract, the doctors found his sister had cancer, and she died just 2 weeks before he was going to disembark. He could not do anything, although I can only imagine how he must have wished to escape from the boat at that moment.

Third visit (30th Sep-7th Oct 2019): Algeciras, Spain. This time when coming back to the boat, everyone in the crew was happy to see me again and it seemed they were better prepared for photoshoots: shaved and with new haircuts. It meant they finally trusted me and did not consider me as a spy anymore as they used to joke before.

This time I knew their schedule precisely and I was warned that the last 3-4 days of the trip were the most stressful for them because of non-stop work in the European harbors taking care of cargo operations, fuel tanking and getting provision. That's why I planned to focus on portraits and interviews with officers during the first three days when we



were in the open sea on our way to London and more on reportage after the first days.

I should say that the seamen on the bridge were more open for conversations and more proud of their job and life style. Enrico, the captain, was originally a Filipino, but he had been living in France since his childhood. He felt lucky he had got a proper education and to be one of the Filipino representatives in the higher rank. He told me he had always admired the adventurous stories of his father's seamen friends. And even if the world was now more open for everyone and the job of a seaman is different from before, he had never been disappointed in his choice of profession. However, in his current position, one faces the risk of staying alone, because depending on the situation, the company might ask them to stay onboard longer or cut their holidays short. It means that a man may not always stay home as much as his wife or girlfriend might hope and expect. As Enrico told me, he sometimes got a chance to see his girlfriend two months in a year, or at another time maybe only for two weeks. This time he was supposed to have a very short holiday and go back to work to a new boat before Christmas and stay for four months.

Even if he has a house in Le Havre, he does not spend that much time there. He feels at home onboard. Besides, being a captain allows him more free time, as most of the paper work is done by a chief mate. When they arrive in South America, he likes to go on the beach and visit the restaurants

to try local food or even visit churches.

However, it is the captain who bears the whole responsibility for the boat and the crew. Enrico seems to be quite secure in his crew members. As he also wants to maintain a nice atmosphere, he can sometimes take the watch of a chief mate to give him an opportunity to go ashore or he spends his free time with the crew watching television.

The third officer Gaetan told me that even at 55 years old, being retired and living alone on a French island, he cannot stop thinking about traveling. When he was 10 years old, his father took him to London on a ferry and they made a photo in front of it. Something made him change his plan to become a seaman instead of a fireman. A few years later he was already on a fishing boat sailing from St. Malo to Canada. He assured me it was the worst trip ever: he spent ten days in the stormy North Atlantic Ocean being totally seasick, and believed it would be the end of his career. But after the seasickness was gone, he found the strength to continue. Gaetan has changed vessels many times in his life - from passenger ships to cargo vessels - and brought new experience with him onboard. Quite often he has chosen a particular vessel not because of the amount of money they paid, but the opportunities to visit specific countries. Once at the wedding of a friend, he met a famous captain of a ship making trips to Antarctica. Shortly after the meeting he got a contract for 5 months. He is one of those people who never say no to adventures.

Gaetan is always traveling with his portable camera and hard drive to keep visual memories. Every evening he took the chance to photograph a sunset. He was joking that the company did not need to pay him for his job as long he can observe such beautiful landscapes and sunsets.

## VISUAL INSPIRATION

Every person is unique and has their own background. It is wonderful to catch the right moment, expression and mood for a picture. Before photographing, I made some sort of an interview with every member of the crew so that I could get to know more about the person and consequently they could feel relaxed when being photographed. I felt how happy they were to see themselves in the pictures; it was probably important for them to feel the attention to their jobs and personalities.

Some years ago I was taking portraits of social workers for a group exhibition. The task was to follow the style of August Sander, a German portrait and documentary photographer. That project played a big role for my current vision. I followed his rule of keeping a distance towards the photographed person and letting them decide themselves which pose to take in front of the camera (Det här är fotografi: Hela historien från 1826 till idag, 2013, p.299).

Although my photos look cleaner, I found photographs of Jean Hermanson, especially the ones which show the working process and environment, also influenced my visual language in some way. As mentioned in the book "Fotografier" (2005), traveling gives you an opportunity for new insights. "Discovery trips involve crossing a boundary, a breakthrough in a new direction. No one knows what one will bring, and this uncertainty is the most exciting moment which drives in the project" (J.Hermanson, 2005, p.45) "

An interesting thing particularly with my project is that I discovered the lifestyle of people gathered from different countries, with different cultural backgrounds and working in specific conditions and in an isolated environment. When I was searching for other photo projects on cargo vessels to use as examples, I did not find that many. But one definitely made an impression on me as the pictures represented the same sort of style I was aiming for. A German photographer Patrick Ludolph visited three vessels for creating the photobook "Seefahrer" (2017). It combines reportage and staged portraits in the same way I did for my book. However, he used only ambient light for his photographs.

Movies, especially those of Jim Jarmush as "The limits of control" or "Night on Earth" and Krzysztof Kieślowski, for example, "Three colours" and "The double life of Veronique" have had a big influence on my visual language, in particular when I am searching for cinematic lighting. If there are not precisely three light sources present in my images, I try to search for reflections to give a three-dimensional feeling. Also, a lot of attention is put on the combination of colors, emotions and environment. In my vision, location should correspond to the type, mood and action of a model, that is why location scouting and analyzing light sources come first before taking images.

As mentioned before, I usually look for cinematic lighting, and for this project particularly I used a flash a lot as

the main light source. Extra interior light/s or daylight were used as rim light or background light. The only thing is that I skipped using color gels which is usually quite common for my work. In this case, though, I tried to keep the colors as natural as possible. In some images where I wanted to keep ambience, I relied only on natural light.

When doing a layout, I tried to keep the transitions in colors. I also followed a kind of rhythm including a text from an email combining it with pictures emphasizing the content in the best way. Visually it created small chapters in the book.

## CONCLUSION

The whole project was definitely an interesting experience for me as a traveler and a photographer. I was thinking a lot about the destiny of these seamen and their life ashore, how it works with their family relationships etc. I should say it is a special category of people as they have to put up with everyday stress, time zone changes, get used to different risks, stay at an isolated place for several months, but at the same time they get to enjoy the simple life onboard, to travel and learn about the world.

Apart from being just a photographer with a camera, I had to find an individual approach towards each crew member to create a comfortable feeling when taking portraits of them. That is why communication skills are very important here. Sometimes I got only 10-15 minutes to take a good portrait. It means that I needed to work fast and professionally to set up the light correctly and guide the model. Also, I needed to choose a location individually for each person so that they would not look the same.

My plan is to make a small photo album as a portfolio and search for a client who would be interested in this particular photo project or a similar one related to professions or social topics. In this way I could continue traveling and photographing. Besides, I also plan to send some copies of my photos to international magazines which might be interested in using them for an article about seamen.

Other than that, I am going to continue working with

cinematic lighting in photography and aim at becoming a cinematographer to shoot movies in the future.

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