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There is a saying that life is lived going forward - but understood going backwards.

To understand the many aspects of the Estonia disaster is a process which still has a very long way to go. Looking back through the years with the knowledge and perspectives time has given, it is however possible to understand developments and see patterns which once were confusing or hidden from view. The reasons for how and why various parts of the Estonia case were handled in the manner they were can now be seen differently. The big HOW and WHY, how did she sink and why is yet to be learned..

But, as we go still some way forward through time - and life - I believe that we shall get that knowledge. Possibly there will even be an understanding why a cover-up was deemed necessary at the time.

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Losing a daughter in the Estonia disaster was an experience which included horror scenes in my mind, impotent rage at my - inevitable - failure to protect my child from harm, frustration at the inability to do anything at all about the situation and also frustration at the fact that whatever I could do or did - memorial service, protest march, meetings, meetings and letters, letters - only were of symbolic value. There was also the anger at the way the authorities took her - in death - away from the family after the sea had taken her life.

It is difficult to describe the experiences from the first time after the disaster. The devastating loss, the warm compassion from so many and the ostensibly caring but heavy-handed attitude from the authorities made for a difficult time.

That was also the time when a structure - if that is a suitable word - in the Estonia matter started to form.

- The real cause of the sinking, apparent when it happened, must not be known
- JAIC presented, less than a week after the disaster, their theory on what caused the sinking. That theory was to remain their only and final one.
- The Swedish government decided that the victims were not to be recovered

That decision became a first confirmation that there was some foundation for the doubts in the official handling which had begun to take root. Another confirmation came in 1997 with the JAIC Final Report.

During the time leading up to the December decision the main issue in the public debate was whether the 757 missing victims were going to be recovered or not, by some described as a matter of national self-respect. Two Swedish prime ministers, one with a few days left in office and the other newly elected, said that for humanitarian reasons all efforts should be made to bring back as many as could be found, no matter the cost.

At the time those words were spoken - right after the disaster - it would have been impossible for a politician to say anything else. Most took it for granted that the bodies would be recovered which, conditions permitting, is always done after an accident. Initially there was a strong opinion in favour of a recovery.

The matter developed however into arguments for salvaging the entire ship, emphasizing the difficulties and the dangers. An official at NMA (National Maritime Administration / Sjöfartsverket) illustrated how physically hazardous and traumatizing such an operation would be with statements such as "the ship has been squeezed like a tin can ... the dead are probably completely crushed and will be very difficult to identify ... at salvage the ship is likely to turn into one big meat grinder".

A study, made in 1996 at one of the Swedish universities, found trends in what some thirty Swedish newspapers had written regarding a recovery. The time frame for the study was the period of most active debate i.e. from the disaster until mid December 1994 when the decision came not to salvage the ship or to recover the victims.

Most apparent in the analysis of editorials and columns was the total support for the government's decisions. Whenever a paper published some criticism of the government it was put in the mouth of someone made to appear not quite rational, irresponsible or not credible.

A different vocabulary and a shift of focus helped, in eight weeks, to change the initial opinion in favour of a recovery into the opposite. Where in news and feature material, the question once had been *Is it possible?* it gradually turned into *Is it right? Technical* was replaced by *ethical* and *wreck site* became *gravesite*. And so on!

When the government decision came on December 15th it was greeted by the media as the not only reasonable thing to do but also as the only solution that was right. One conclusion drawn in the study was that the role of the newspapers during that period had been to legitimize the government handling.

A skilful manipulation of public opinion - in the words of journalists.

Explosions

The possibility of a bomb, a bomb scare is something that regrettably has become part of today's world. It doesn't take much; a parcel left in a shopping mall may result in the cordoning off of entire city blocks. It is always taken very seriously and the authorities respond with all necessary means.

An acute danger is of course very different from words on paper but the reports regarding the possibility of explosion on Estonia should, instead of being met with indifference, normally have caused activities to either verify or dispute them

The point here is not whether there was some explosion on Estonia - before, during or after the sinking - or whatever effect there might have been. The point is how little effect these reports had on Swedish authorities and media.

Seven out of nine highly qualified expert instances found reason to indicate that Estonia had been subjected to explosion. It would be an exaggeration to say that the authorities and media treated that information seriously and with the attention one would expect in such a grave matter.

There's a Swedish phrase which roughly translated says that 'the trolls have gotten into the matter' meaning that for inexplicable reasons it cannot be solved or explained, that normal standards of logic do not apply.

Did the trolls get into the matter or was the explosion, perpetrator and purpose already known?

The never ending story

The main purpose of the project that has brought us here today is to find how and why the ship could disappear from the surface of the sea in half an hour or less. I trust that the outcome of the project will give an answer to those questions and expect that, directly or indirectly, this will lead to further discoveries.

How she could sink so fast is however not all that needs to be clarified. It has become evident that the aspects concerning the condition of the ship and circumstances around the sinking itself are just one part of the story. There are a great number of question marks that need to be straightened out before Estonia can be laid to rest and become part of history.

Why did Estonia become such a never ending story? Some factors were

- The sinking became a matter of high level politics right from the start.
- The minister, first given responsibility for the matter, antagonized many, not only the victim's families, with her insensitive handling.
- The official investigation failed to give a credible explanation of the sinking.
- The high-handed manner in which Swedish authorities took over all decision-making concerning an Estonian ship which sank in international waters.
- Suspicions regarding real motive surrounding government decisions. Such as leaving the victims in the wreck and prohibiting all access to it, the gravesite treaty and the plan to cover the wreck with concrete. When obliged to order investigations into transport of military goods and manipulation of videotapes, uncalled for limitations indicated that the authorities did not want the full story to become known.
- The stonewalling of well-founded criticism and requests for a new investigation which came from maritime expertise, politicians and their parties, trade unions and victims organisations.
- The political handling in Parliament. Repeated motions calling for a new investigation were neutralized.

Some of the above factors developed over the years as a consequence of how the Estonia story started and how one thing led to another. A plain answer, to why the Estonia 'affair' will keep turning until the truth comes out is that

- Estonia sank because her hull was no longer intact.
- it was decided that the real cause must not be revealed.

Responsibility

One of the primary tasks for the authorities after an accident is to find out who has any responsibility for what happened. To prevent something similar to happen again an investigation must establish if safety regulations have been violated, if there is any need for change in operating procedures or if there is something which can be attributed to the human factor. There are also other areas of responsibility that need to be considered, the economic aspect, wrongdoings must have consequences and justice must be served.

So, what is the situation with Estonia - is there anybody, an individual, organisation or whatever which has any responsibility in one of the greatest peacetime accidents in Europe? - We know that the national Maritime Administrations of Sweden, Finland and Estonia, the Estonian and Swedish joint owners and Bureau Veritas can be counted out. They have all been declared not responsible.

As it is impossible that an accident of Estonia's dimensions can happen without somebody somewhere having some responsibility for some part of the whole the official investigation did indeed find a measure of responsibility.

To illustrate the likelihood of that finding we can compare Estonia with a major bus accident where the investigation concludes

- The bus driver had no responsibility for what happened
- The bus company - no responsibility
- The Vehicle Inspection Authority, certifying that the bus was approved for public transport - no responsibility
- The only party found to have some responsibility was Volvo who had built the bus too weak, "not designed according to realistic design assumptions", 14 years earlier!

If you will excuse the language - not bloody likely!

It is an outrage that our authorities seem content to leave the matter of all the lives taken in the Estonia disaster without the least effort at finding where some real responsibility lies.

Derbyshire

Still on the matter of responsibility there's a story about an English ship that could - and should - serve as an example for the Estonia case.

MV Derbyshire is a name which may be familiar to many here. Twice the size of Estonia she was a bulk carrier from Liverpool which disappeared without a trace in a typhoon south of Japan in 1980. As there was no evidence no formal investigation was made and although an official statement said that she probably was "overcome by the forces of nature" it was assumed by many that her crew was responsible for the sinking.

In order to get a proper investigation which could clear the names of their loved ones the families of the seamen formed the Derbyshire Family Association. With a tireless campaign they managed to convince the International Transport Workers Federation to finance an expedition which located and made a first survey of the wreck which was at a depth of 4 200 metres. The successful outcome of that expedition convinced the UK

Government to send out a second which in two phases gathered great volumes of information. Items of wreckage, 136 000 photos and 200 hours of video footage provided evidence for the formal investigation which in the end concluded that structural damages had caused the ship to sink.

Twenty years after the sinking it became clear what was the cause, important knowledge for shipbuilding was gained and the master and crew of Derbyshire were cleared of any responsibility.

The hole

Quite a number of people have been talking and writing about a hole in the side of Estonia.

One of them was a high ranking official of the NMA at a meeting in Stockholm 1996. Replying to a question from the audience whether there was a hole in the starboard side he gave the short answer: "Yes! Next question."

More specific was the head of the NMA Inspection office in Stockholm. When interrogated by a prosecutor and it was suggested that the absence of a partial collision door might have been a contributing factor in the disaster, he strongly objected and said that in his opinion it was the explosion hole in the starboard side which was the cause of the sinking.

Among others who have written about the hole are The German Group of Experts in their recently updated website as well as The Independent Fact Group and the American journalist Drew Wilson in his book "The Hole".

In a filmed interview a second lieutenant in the Swedish naval reserve told of his participation in a diving expedition to the wreck of Estonia just a few days after the sinking. On the starboard side he saw a hole he estimated to be 4 – 5 metres and wide enough for a diver to pass through with all his gear.

Further to this we may consider

- the JAIC final report 8.5.1 – "No external damage other than that in the visor and forward ramp area was observed on the wreck".
- the report from Kurm dated March 10th 2006 which states that the bottom part of the hull has never been examined or filmed in the full possible extent.
- the information from the diving operation in august 2000 which observed great amounts of sand and rock in a band across the forward part of the ship

Can any of the above be regarded as reliable information? The only way to determine that is an inspection of the wreck.

What should be done?

After the Committee of Investigation set up by the Estonian Parliament presented their report in November last year a leading Swedish politician said: "I don't wish to prolong the agony of those who lost loved ones with too many political controversies around it and you can see that as a comment directed against those who wish to play politics with the tragedy. I don't think it should be done".

Instead of playing politics himself he would do better to consider the frustration and anger that thirteen years of a prolonged Estonia 'affair' has caused, not only in those personally touched by the tragedy. The damage to public faith in our authorities should also be a concern. Putting political obstacles in the way of the truth is not the way it should be done.

So, what should be done?

- All practical or administrative measures prohibiting inspection of the wreck should be amended / modified / recalled / revoked or suspended as five Estonia organisations wrote in a letter to the governments of the nine countries who signed the gravesite treaty.
- The wreck of Estonia is the place for a disastrous accident, a crime scene according to a high ranking police officer. Although it has seen considerable traffic over the years the search for evidence has not been terminated. It should be made available for an examination which may bring conclusive information.
- As stipulated in the SOLAS convention, Resolution A.849(20) the Estonia investigation should be reopened. An independent investigation this time!

In the Derbyshire case there was a happy ending in the sense that the How and Why in the sinking and the matter of responsibility were clarified. One of the most positive effects was however the lessons learned with which safer ships could be built, saving lives in the future.

Let us wish - and work - for such a happy ending also for Estonia. With open minds and honest intentions from all it can happen.