

# The Long Way Home

## In August 1920 a Japanese merchant ship arrived in New York.

Instead of the usual cargo, it carried seven hundred Russian children, their two hundred teachers and a few dozen Hungarian prisoners of war. Even more unusual: The group was led by a team from Hawai'i.

As a ranger for the National Park Service, one of the most interesting parts of my job is uncovering little-known histories and sharing them with visitors. This one intrigued me: Why were people from Hawai'i bringing Russians and Austro-Hungarians to New York aboard a Japanese cargo ship? Answering that question led me to one of the most inspiring stories I ever uncovered in my thirty-one years as a ranger. I traveled to Hawai'i, New York and now, as I write this, I am in Budapest, still uncovering details.

In 1918 the Bolshevik Revolution had sparked violence and unemployment in St. Petersburg, and food shipments from Ukraine had stopped. Fearing for their children's safety, parents sent their kids to a summer camp thousands of miles east, in the Ural Mountains, where they stayed in resorts for former Russian nobility. They were well cared for and educated by St. Petersburg's finest teachers, and wrote home with stories of good food and adventure in the forests of the Urals. Then, about midsummer, the letters stopped. The revolution and a civil war were spreading, and months passed without word. Three of the parents and a Swedish Red Cross agent walked thousands of miles along broken railways, through battle zones, to find the children alive but stranded. Without safe passage by train, there was no way to get them home.

During the last two years of her life, Queen Lili'uokalani mobilized the people of Hawai'i to donate money, medicine and supplies to people whose countries were being invaded by foreign armies. Volunteers made clothing in 'Iolani Palace—Duke Kahanamoku knitted clothes for refugees. Honolulu firefighters sewed a tag to every sweater with the message, "Aloha Nui Loa," very much love. In 1917, Lili'uokalani transformed her relief organization into a chapter of the American Red Cross, sewing a Red Cross flag to fly above 'Iolani Palace. By 1918 Hawai'i's Red

Cross volunteers were being called overseas to help refugees. Honolulu businessman Alfred Castle and newspaper editor Riley Allen were asked to assemble a team from Hawai'i to deliver aid in Siberia.

Soon after arriving in Siberia, Allen learned about the children, low on food and struggling through the winter with only summer clothes, and initiated a relief effort. Henry Ho'olulu Beckley, the only Native Hawaiian on the team and an ali'i (royal), organized relief trains. As he traveled, the charismatic Beckley befriended railway employees, bandits and militias. He reached the children, who were soon warmly dressed and back in classes with their teachers, but they were still far from home and the war was spreading.

Then Allen received a telegram from Jeanette Searight, a former teacher from Kaua'i stationed in Siberia. The Communist army was advancing, destroying everything in its path. To get the children to Red Cross headquarters in far-off Vladivostok, Searight coordinated with Allen via telegraph, securing a train and arranging for dozens of wagons to get the children to a depot. Beckley outfitted the train and drove it on the harrowing journey. From Vladivostok the only route home was around the world by ship. Ward Walker, a Red Cross engineer from Maui, spent nearly two months in Japan converting a cargo ship into a passenger vessel. On July 12, 1920, the refitted *Yomei Maru* arrived in Vladivostok. The Hungarians, once Russian prisoners of war, were taken aboard to work as bakers and cooks. They crossed the Pacific, stopping in Japan, California and New York. In 1921 the children arrived home in St. Petersburg, then renamed Petrograd. Allen's only regret was they could not stop in Honolulu due to lack

of funds: He had wanted those in Hawai'i to meet the children they had supported for so long.

Recently the grandchildren of the rescued Austro-Hungarians and Russians have been connecting on social media to commemorate their grandparents' odyssey. They feel that now, more than ever, their story should be shared to inspire and encourage the world to aid refugees of war. HH



[ Story by Dan Meharg ]

PAU HANA