

Trust no ship without animals on board

by Przemysław Myszka

The Polish full-rigged sailing ship *Dar Pomorza* (*Gift of Pomerania*), functioning in Gdynia as a museum since 1983, is hosting an exhibition till end-November 2024 devoted to the various animals that inhabited her deck, rigs, cabins, and holds for nearly 100 years (the 1909-built frigate joined the Polish fleet in mid-1930). It paints a colourful history – often very exotic in the interwar period, though not without bitter moments here & there – clearly delineated by how the world changed after 1945.

The period leading to WWII saw *Dar Pomorza* embarking on transoceanic voyages – also carrying scientific expeditions on two occasions during which thousands of specimens were collected, including for the Warsaw Zoological Garden. Those escapades brought on board venomous snakes, parrots, monkeys, turtles, coatis, flamingos, and even a panther (!), not to mention 600 jars with river and sea plankton. Some of the animals were captured by sailors and officers themselves, probably to bring back home creatures known only from books.

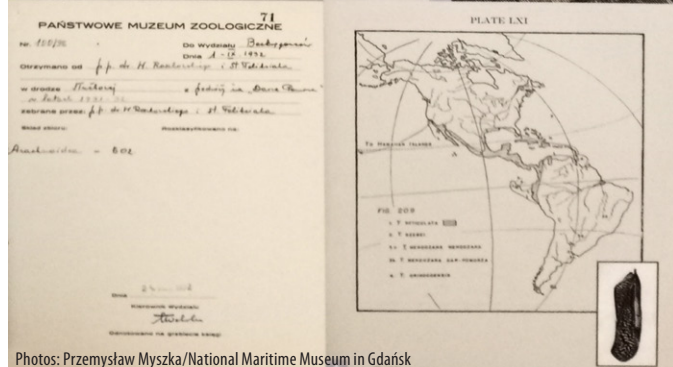


Photo: Wikimedia Commons

The life of these animals on *Dar Pomorza* wasn't easy as the ship wasn't built as an expedition vessel nor fitted to act as one. As such, the animals were placed haphazardly, oftentimes without proper accommodation. The salt from seawater damaged their feet, while, e.g., monkeys suffered from sea sickness. The threat of going overboard was ever-present. But as the crew got accustomed to their furry & feathered passengers, the care-taking conditions also luckily changed for the better.

The two mentioned scientific expeditions – to Brazil and Angola – took place in 1931-32 and 1933-34. When in the Brazilian City of Paranaguá (*Great Round Sea*) at the break of 1931 and 32, the researchers paddled upstream and discovered a new species of boat bug. Examined carefully by Tadeusz Jaczewski, the little thing received the Latin name of *Trichocorixa dar-pomorza*. The ship's crew supported the scientists in their exploits, although they found some of them a bit peculiar, like collecting shark parasites.

In 1934, *Dar Pomorza* was in the Angolan Port of Lobito. The crew paid a visit to the Boa Serra plantation near the town of Huambo, managed by a Polish couple: Maria and Michał Zamoyski. The scientists gathered research material, while the crew received a ten-month-old panther from Maria and Michał... The animal was a gift for the zoological garden in Warsaw. The large cat, named Cleopatra in recognition of the grandness she displayed, was domesticated and quickly won the sailors' hearts (though she was keen on tearing their pants and biting the trouser legs with her razor-sharp claws and



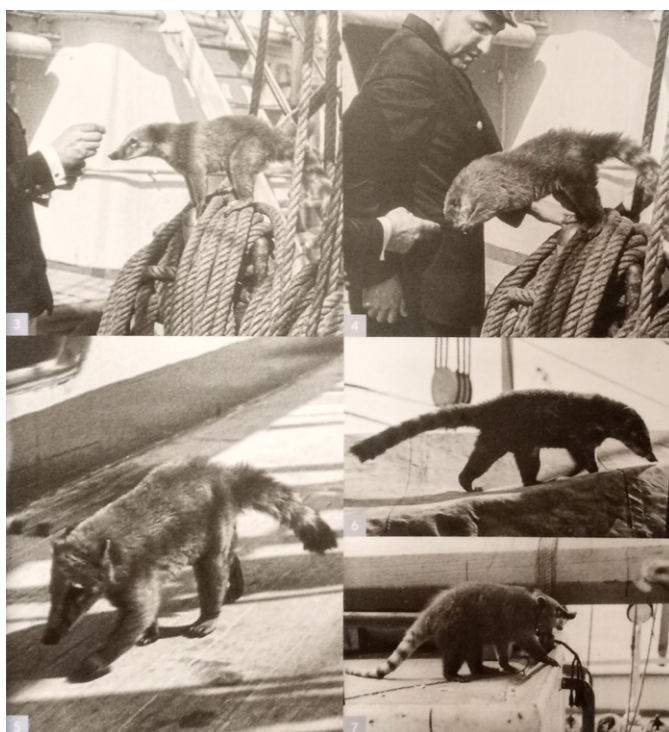
Photos: Przemysław Myszka/National Maritime Museum in Gdańsk

needle-piercing fangs). The panther was also on good terms with a coati, having no quarrel with him when it came to mapping out each other's area on *Dar Pomorza* (Cleo even let the coati eat from her bowl!). Upon arrival in Gdynia, the panther was transported to Warsaw.



in it, all-red-dripping Miś was more than happy to crisscross the just-washed blankets and bed linen... In spite of such mishaps, coatis were the crew's favourites: they liked to be cuddled and often dozed off on sailors' laps. Two coatis, Miś-Tryc and Misk-Miś, made it ashore in the course of time, finding shelter in zoological gardens.

By the way, coatis on board *Dar Pomorza* were a topic in and of itself. These animals weren't accustomed to confined spaces, which resulted in them wreaking havoc (somehow, tearing pages from books was one of their favourite free-time pursuits). Once Miś, one of the interwar coatis, kicked a tin can full of fish oil that landed on the freshly cleaned deck. Another time, he tipped over a can with anti-corrosive paint. Covered

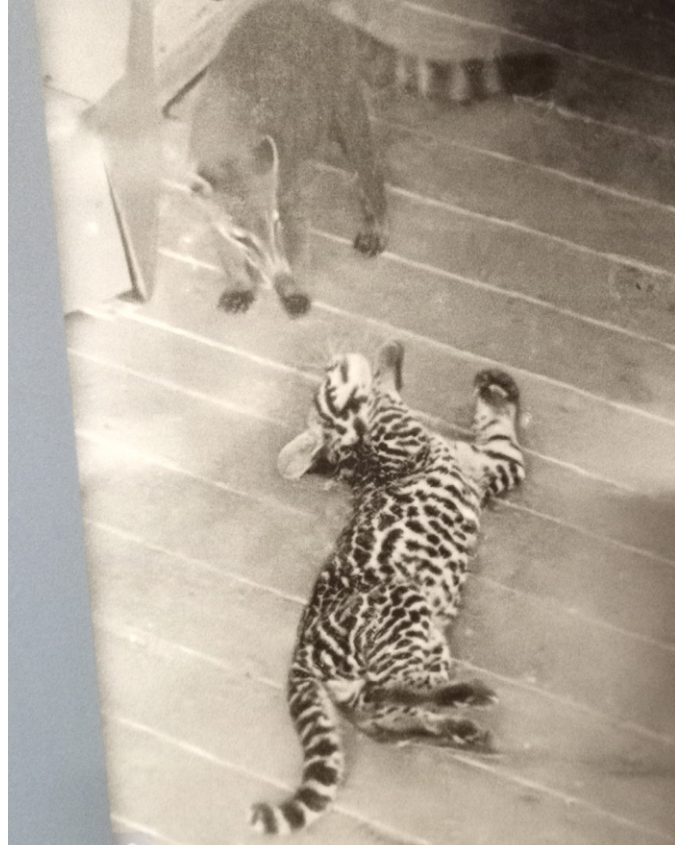




The 1934-35 round-the-world voyage also witnessed a lot of animals boarding *Dar Pomorza*. It all started while the ship was still in Europe with the purchase of a monkey on Tenerife (for the price of white trousers, a shirt, a hat, a pair of low shoes and socks, and one shilling). As the trip continued, more and more animals became part of the crew, the bulk of them when *Dar Pomorza* was on the Galápagos Islands: two large and



Photo: National Maritime Museum in Gdańsk



nine small turtles, two young pelicans and a flamingo. In Australia, in the Port of Broome, the Captain bought four parrots. More birds of the same species were taken in while on Java, together with two monkeys, a cat, and an ichneumon. At some point, the need to appoint a 'student-zoologist' for every watch arose, who was in charge of taking care of the animals (including feeding and cleaning thereafter).



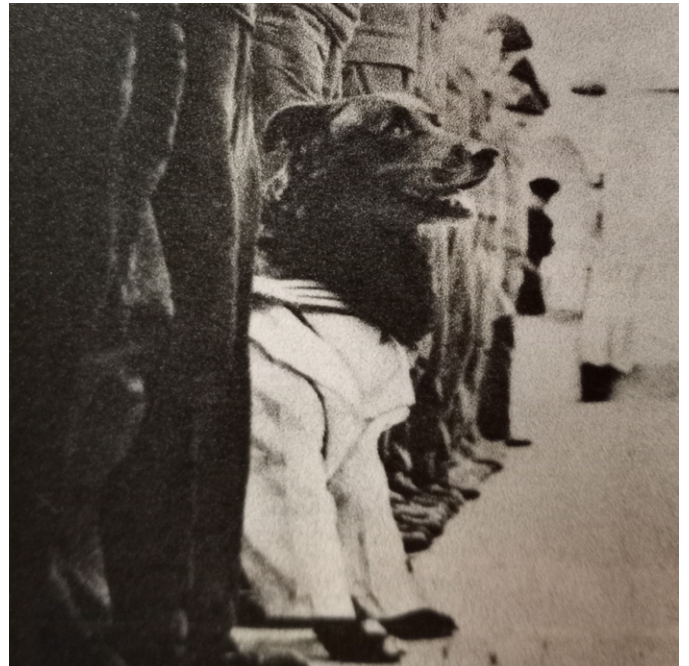


Photo: National Maritime Museum in Gdańsk

Unfortunately, living on a sailing ship was unbearable for some of the animals. The flamingo passed away after a couple of weeks, one of the pelicans went overboard, two parrots from Australia also died, and the monkey Moniek, who travelled with the crew for the larger part of the journey, checked out one month before *Dar Pomorza* landed in Gdynia.

Other animals made it safely, including a boa constrictor bought by the ship doctor for his wife! Interestingly, the snake was at first locked in a cage, but after some time, the animal was released and could sleep on a bunk (more specifically, wrapped around the bedspring). Records speak of a coati, a didelphis, turtles, and a cougar making it to the Warsaw Zoological Garden. One parrot and a coati found shelter in a similar menagerie in Pelplin. Parrots and monkeys usually stayed with the families of the sailors.

Sadly, certain animals – chiefly seals and sharks (including pregnant ones whose unborn ones were fed to the pelicans; the same fate was dealt to flying fish) as well as Galápagos turtles – weren't even given the slightest chance to make it alive when *Dar Pomorza* entered their territories. Some of the officers carried hunting rifles and didn't shy away from using them. Apart from the animals mentioned above, three kangaroos in Australia and a deer on Mauritius also fell prey to the fiery lead. Some other day, students organised a turtle race, but fortunately, that



ZAPISKI PSUBRATA leszek prorok

ossolineum



was only a one-time thing (in the 1970s, someone carved horses out of wood from that time used as racing figures).

Speaking of turtles, after WWII, *Dar Pomorza* ceased embarking on such grandiose voyages. Instead, she mainly plied in the Baltic, seldom in the Mediterranean, and only on special occasions did she visit the Red Sea. Consequently, there were no opportunities to catch exotic animals. With one exception, that is. In May 1963, en route from Piraeus to Naples, *Dar Pomorza* spotted turtles

passing by the ship. One of the crew members jumped and caught six animals. They were placed in a 'pool' made of sailcloth (originally used for bathing by the students). The turtles were to be transferred to the Gdańsk Zoological Garden but eventually stayed with the National Marine Fisheries Research Institute in Gdynia.

Also in 1963, a legend was born: the dog Miś (Teddy Bear), transferred, so to speak, from *Zawisza Czarny* (the 1952-built-as-a-fishing-boat-1961-turned-yacht belonging to the Polish Scouting and Guiding Association). Back then, Misiiek was but a tyke, fooling around with the cats from the Lady Walewska clan (see Rats & cats). He was most often seen on deck or in the mess eating his favourite candies or fermented cucumbers (or under the captain's living quarters, where it rocked the least during a storm). Miś wasn't a landlubber. While berthed, he disembarked *Dar Pomorza* to mark the nearest bollard or tree and quickly got back on deck to guard the gangway. Then again, he also wasn't especially fond of waves, barking at them doggedly (including by sticking his head through a fairlead, most probably to have, I suppose, a better barking position). On the other hand, Misiiek was a true fan of sails. He was hurrying with the rest of the crew when it was time to make sails, accompanying the chief mate when he shouted the instructions. The dog was very disappointed when it came to kick-starting *Dar Pomorza's* engine. Miś performed his



duties (among others, ringing the bell for watch change) till finally, rheumatism got the better of him. Miś went ashore in the spring of 1976. He passed away in the autumn of the same year in an animal shelter in Gdynia. But back in his under-sail years, Misiiek became a bit of a celebrity. Starting from 1967, there was a series of articles about him. He even made it on a book cover (a collection of essays about animals by Leszek Prorok) and likewise acted as a cunning painting portrait model (two paintings by A. Gozdawa-Strzyżowski)! The last one shouldn't come as a surprise: the crew sewed him a genuine sailor's jacket and a cap with boatswain's insignia in which he looked like one fine handsome devil (though making him wear pants wasn't the best idea, particularly when Miś decided it was time to pump ship...).

Rats & cats...

There was one animal which *Dar Pomorza* didn't want to see on her board: rats. Several measures were used to either get rid of them or prevent their intrusion in the first place. Regarding the latter, rat guards had to be installed on mooring lines. According to regulations, these were to prevent the rodents from going ashore. The crew saw it the other way around: to make it difficult for rats to break into the food storage located on *Dar Pomorza's* bow. Before sailing out of Gdynia, the ship had to undergo rodent extermination, which meant gassing the unwelcome stowaways. And, naturally, *Dar Pomorza* was also home to cats – but not those fluffy ones from modern commercials that get their meals straight outta lush-looking cans and served on a shining platter. The seafaring feline killers had to hunt down their food! Two cats made history here: Lady Walewska and Fela. The former (together with Peggy, Blacky, and Buc) joined *Dar Pomorza* in the autumn of 1946 while the ship was berthed in Portsmouth. And boy, did the crew admire her hunting skills! In the

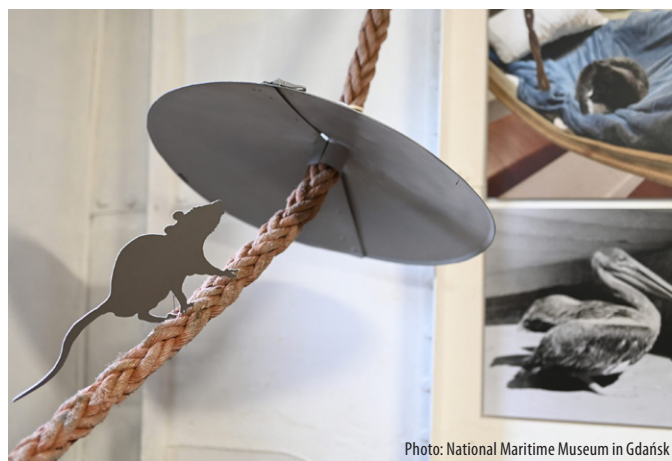


Photo: National Maritime Museum in Gdańsk



1950s, Lady Walewska went ashore in Gdańsk and didn't turn up when the vessel was clawing away. Fast forward one year, and she greeted *Dar Pomorza* when the ship was back in Poland! Her behaviour was somewhat peculiar, though, as if she wanted to show the crew something. The ship's electrician followed her to the shipyard, where he discovered a few still blind newborn kittens. The whole gang was

adopted, and *Dar Pomorza* could continue sailing with her fiercest rat hunter. She sailed till the mid-1960s when the dog *Miś* boarded the vessel. At first, the feline-canine relations were correct, but then Misiiek worried a stray cat, and the so-called Walewska Clan decided it was high time to evacuate. When the dog departed for the eternal watch, there were no other animals that occupied *Dar Pomorza* for a longer



period. That changed when the coronavirus pandemic hit the fan. Before COVID-19, Fela lived on the Southern Pier in Gdynia, which had a rich array of bars and restaurants. When these establishments had to close their doors due to the hard lockdown, the cat reevaluated her options and decided she could very well become a sailor. The pandemic is no more, but Fela has grown a liking for living at sea. She can be seen prowling *Dar Pomorza*, most notably the ship's kitchen and shop, but above all, Fela likes to spend her time on a hammock

in the student quarters. Naturally, there were other cats on board *Dar Pomorza*, mainly during the interbellum, but their names got sunk in the waves of history. That said, the exhibition managed to surface two anecdotes. First, when a domestic cat saw another feline aboard the ship, a leopard, to be precise, experiencing a shock at the sight. The second story also involves a shock, but this time, when another cat heard the performance of the newly-formed musical band of *Dar Pomorza* and had to hide in the farthest corner of the ship.

... and other 'animals' on board *Dar Pomorza*

The exhibition also brings forth parts of the ship or its equipment named after animals. "Cows" are the two lifeboats positioned on the main deck. "Lambs" refer to wooden round elements placed inside metal rings, e.g., to lessen the tearing friction when pulling ropes. A "piglet" denotes ballast cubes. "Hedgehogs" or "kittens" are protective covers made of old ropes and placed where rigging could tear the sails. "Fireflies" are glass upper works through which

light can get into those parts of the ship without portholes (or with too few of them). There is, of course, the "dog watch." *Dar Pomorza*, however, misses a crow's nest ("stork's nest" in Polish), a structure specific for smaller units. The masts of the vessel are 40-metre-tall, meaning that no warning could be heard from such a distance. *Dar Pomorza* has, instead, "eyes," two small bridges situated on the foredeck. ■

ŚWIETLIK



PSIA WACHTA NA OKU



KROWY



BARANKI



BARANKI



PROSIKI



JEŻE/KOTKI

