

"She's a brave lady..."

by Przemysław Myszka

"...with great potential remaining," greeted us Henryk Tybuszewski, Hotel/F&B Manager at Unity Line (together with Polferries the founders of the POLSCA Baltic Ferries brand), when our other Przemek and I boarded *Skania* moored at the Westerplatte Ferry Terminal in Gdańsk's Inner Port on 3 August. Built in 1995 for the Greeks from Superfast Ferries, she also plied the Mediterranean with Grimaldi Ferries before heading north to join Unity Line's fleet in 2008. This summer, after a retouch, *Skania* has been entrusted, along with the more cargo-focused *Copernicus*, with serving a completely new crossing in the Baltic: between Gdańsk and Karlshamn. Our region's ferry market is a fairly settled affair, so such a development doesn't come along all that often. We were invited to experience it first-hand.



Photo: Przemysław Myszka

And because of Henryk, it was a unique experience indeed. He has been sailing since the end of the 1980s, including on cruise ships in the Caribbean. With Unity Line since mid-1997, Henryk has been part of the crews of several ferries, among them *Skania* for almost a decade (2009-18). We had the opportunity to sail many a time during our respective tenures at *BTJ*, as well as privately – mostly in the Baltic but also in the Med., and on vessels somewhat younger, larger, and more cruise-oriented than *Skania*. But the wine-and-dine reception we received was exceptionally personal this time – and that warmth from our host really did make a difference!

Not that *Skania* couldn't stand up for herself. At almost 174 metres long, she accommodates 900 passengers (across 196 cabins of eight size/travel quality categories, 600 beds in total, plus a few rows of airplane seats) and four decks with 2,170 lane metres for private vehicles as well as trucks and trailers (*Copernicus'* capacities tot up to, respectively, 160 travellers and 1,830 lane metres). During our round trip, *Skania* hosted a mix – foot and motorised passengers, from both ends of the service, and ro-ro cargo units. We were, in fact, positively surprised by the number of travellers. When sailing from Świnoujście occasionally, truckers overwhelmingly dominated the manifest (truth

be told, private passengers were little more than a sideshow to the cargo business). The Gdańsk-Karlshamn crossing, at least its *Skania* component, much more closely resembles the neighbouring Gdynia-Karlskrona route, with plenty of tourists (including families with kids of various ages). It was a welcome sight to see people choosing a ferry over an airplane (or getting stuck in a traffic jam, say, on the way towards the Öresund Bridge). Last but not least, judging by the litter tray on one of the external decks, one can also travel with animals (in designated pet-friendly cabins).

On board, *Skania* offers four places to dine: Cafeteria (where breakfast is served), Snack



Photos: POLSCA Baltic-Ferries



Bar, the Bon Appétit à la carte restaurant, and the One Way Truckers Club. Meat-free options are what Cafeteria and Bon Appétit share in common (and the latter's burger, with two different veggie patties, is as tasty as it's filling – my personal compliments to the chef!). For those who like their calories also in liquid form, *Skania* offers the Cocktail Bar with a wide variety of drinks. If the groove strikes, the Disco Bar has you covered with music and a dance floor. And for those feeling lucky, there's a corner for cards or a go at the one-armed bandit. On the shopping side, there's a perfume parlour (chiefly stocked with the ladies in mind) and a store with all sorts of souvenirs, snacks, and 'laughing water' (Finnish vodka matured in charred oak barrels is not something you see every day – a curtsy to whoever thought of those with a taste for the less obvious!). For admirers of sun-downs and ups alike (the Swedish archipelago, Gdańsk's Inner Port, or just wind tousling your hair), *Skania*'s stern offers a viewing deck. Her current departure times (9 p.m. from Gdańsk and 5 p.m. from Karlshamn) make it easy to enjoy both (if you fancy waking up before five in the morning, that is). Thanks to Henryk, we were treated to a unique view on the evening of our departure – from the captain's bridge, in the company of the skipper himself and his crew, with Henryk sharing his thoughts on the differences between sailing the Baltic and the Caribbean as well as how ferrying itself has changed course over the past three decades. After that, we retired to our cabins for a well-deserved shut-eye.

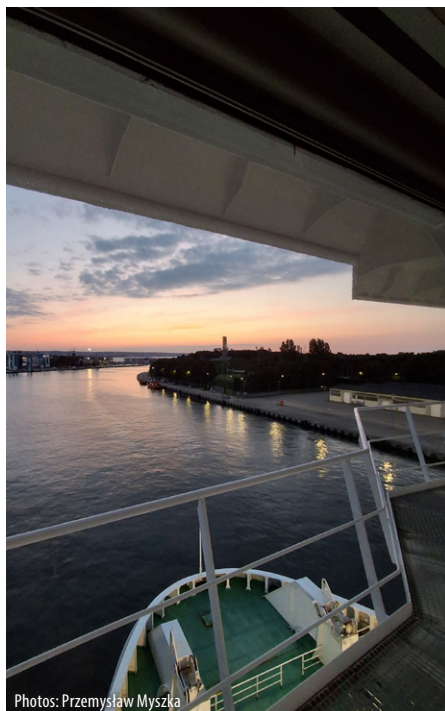
The 4th of August greeted us with fair weather and a hearty breakfast. Afterwards, we headed to the viewing deck to observe the approach to the Port of Karlshamn and then the mooring and unloading of trucks. While all the other foot passengers hopped on buses that took them to the town, we were guided through a pivot gate and then another gate in the port's fence (one of the undeniable advantages of BTJ Trips – you get to see places that are off-limits to others). After a few paces, we landed at the port authority's head office doorstep, where Caroline Säfström,

the Port of Karlshamn's CEO, welcomed us. We made our way to the conference room, where we also met Pär Carlsson, in charge of the seaport's marketing & sales – and a big fan of sailing! Then came the surprise. Because taking a ferry is far more forgiving baggage-wise than boarding an airplane, I had brought along some homemade cake – an act that, we were told, went down in the port's history as the first-ever visit where somebody did such a thing. You're welcome!

Over a few slices of cocoa-coconut cake, a cup of coffee, and some Swedish pastry for good measure, we talked business – and then some. The Port of Karlshamn is genuinely pleased to see POLSCA Baltic Ferries with its new service, keeping their fingers crossed for the volumes to continue building up. A week after our visit, on 12 August, the Polish Ambassador to Sweden, Karolina Ostrzyniewska, came to Karlshamn to attend the official opening of the Gdańsk-Karlshamn ferry crossing – an occasion to celebrate a development that strengthens trade, logistics, and tourist ties between the two Baltic neighbours. We were more than happy to have contributed our own small share over those three early-August days.

Next, Pär took us on a drive across the port. We were by no means strangers to Karlshamn, thanks to our visit four years earlier, but one should never say no when an opportunity to see a seaport from the inside arises. Having arrived by ferry and driving near three of them moored at the same time (apart from *Skania*, also DFDS' *Optima Seaways* and TT-Line's *Marco Polo* – both of them plying to and from Klaipėda), I couldn't resist asking Pär how the port feels about the EU-mandated investment in onshore power supply. The Port of Karlshamn has already installed one station (supplied by Cavotec) for DFDS' *Luna Seaways*. As in other seaports, it's tricky. Beyond the question of whether shipping lines will actually utilise the facility – they, too, need to upgrade their vessels to enable cold ironing – there's the matter of putting in place supporting infrastructure outside the port's premises, investments that must be borne by whoever runs the local energy infra. That and other shore-power essentials: enough electricity 'on hand' and at the right price.

Beyond the ferry business, we also saw a lot of forestry products (treated and untreated timber, wooden logs, and pulp) and some containers (with supplies for the pulp mill of Södra in the nearby Mörrum, capacity of 470,000 tonnes/year). Pär also showed us Karlshamn's double-track rail terminal for combined traffic. The port is counting on the Swedish Transport Administration to build the Southeast Link between Älmhult and the Blekinge Coastal Trunk Railway – a connection that would eliminate the need for freight trains to detour via Malmö. Together with a new marshalling yard, Karlshamn hopes to see a spike in rail



Photos: Przemysław Myszk



volumes (something that would alleviate the environment from a truly business direction). Construction start of the Southeast Link is tentatively set for 2027-29. With considerable storage space for project cargo, the Swedish seaport also would like to feel a wind of change concerning offshore wind energy. General elections are due in Sweden this autumn, so perhaps a shift in the political spectrum will bring more favourable winds. Who knows?

Pär dropped us off in the centre of Karlshamn, where we had just enough free time to stock up on Swedish coffee, enjoy a cold brew at the waterfront (offering a spectacular view of an AAK factory – a producer of vegetable oils and fats – if anyone resonates with the industrial vibe), and take a short walk to admire the ceaselessly quaint Swedish architecture and street furniture.

Pär collected us a couple of hours later and deposited us in front of *Skania's* ramp. Dinner, a bottle of that *Suomi*-distilled clarity from the on-board shop, and an evening crowned by a gorgeous sunset over the Baltic horizon. It was time to say goodbye to Karlshamn.

The 5th of August greeted us with weather altogether different from what the rain-bearing forecasts had promised. After admiring the sunrise and catching a quick nap before breakfast, we were back on deck, this time drinking in Gdańsk's Inner Port – a lot, in truth, as *Skania* has to sail quite a long way to turn around and berth at the Westerplatte Ferry Terminal. And that was that. Thanks to POLSCA Baltic Ferries, Unity Line, and Henryk for a more than pleasant journey. We wish you, as well as our partners from Karlshamn, fair winds and following seas! ■