

Edward Kalisher writing home about his trip to Europe – 1914

Steinberger & Kalisher
Kid Gloves
The Eshay Line
114 Fifth Avenue

SS Rotterdam
10-21-1914

My dear friends;

My original intention was to drop you a few lines, as a little surprise, from somewhere about the region of the North Pole, but the best laid plans of men and mice oft gang alee, {from poem by Robert Burns in Scots and means the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry } and hence this little hard luck history.

Tess and I planned a trip to Iceland, Spitzbergen, the North Cape and the Norwegian fiords this Summer and we left New York on June 27th, on the S.S. Prince Friedrich Wm. Of the N.G. Lloyd line at 10 A.M. At 3 A.M. preceding, our little girl – quite a young lady now, 10 years old – awakened us and said she didn't feel well, and we found she had quite a high fever. We telephoned for the best, and of course, the most expensive children's specialist in New York and he came at 5 A.M. and told us Elinor had some symptoms of measles but advised us to go, and assured us that there was really less danger on ship than on shore. So we left as we were to join the Polar excursion ship at Edinboro and couldn't make it unless we took that ship – the Prince Fr. Wm. 24 hours out convinced us and also the ship's doctor that she had measles and we had to keep away from all children on board and all friends who had children and to keep Elinor strictly to our cabin.

We sent a marconigram, costing a small fortune, cancelling our reservations on the Victoria Louise for the Polar trip and received the comforting reply that they would release us if they succeeded in selling the tickets to some other feller, but not otherwise. We arrived at Bremen with Elinor convalescing and through the kindness of the owners of the pension at which we always shop in Berlin, we were able to keep her quiet until we could move on again to St. Joschimstahl a "Kurart" in Bohemia where they treat patients with Radium water and baths. It's only $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour by auto from Karlsbad and quite a number of wealthy Karlsbad Kurites used to come over daily to take the baths, among others young Baron Rothschild of Paris and Mr. Samuel Untermeyer of New York. It was also one hours ride by auto from our factory just across the border in Saxony. WE kept religiously away from business, however, that is to say, as much as the desire of my partner to annoy me in every possible way would allow. Nothing very serious happened during the first ten days except that Tess didn't feel just herself and Elinor had a lively attack of tonsilitis. These minor matters however were overcome and the baths were doing me good, when Austria declared war against Servia, and Austria mobilized her army – all mails and trains were

commandeered by the military authorities and no telegrams were sent. I felt at once that Germany and perhaps all Europe would be drawn into the war and tried hard to get into communication with Steinberger, who was in Kiesingen taking his Kur, but without success. Finally I tried the town Autobus, and I assure you no more uncomfortable automobile exists anywhere on earth, the seats run lengthwise, there are no arm rests, there's nothing inside one can hold on to and for one hour of discomfort I rode to our factory, only to be told when we arrived at the border that I could not be allowed to cross the border because I had no passport. I'll never be without one again, although I'd no occasion for one before in the 24 years I've been coming over here. After much consultation we were allowed to go up the hill (the factory is near the top of a very steep hill) under guard with the privilege of remaining three hours, provided the superintendent would certify in writing that I was Mr. Kalisher and that I would leave the country in three hours. Arriving there, I got this telephonic communication with our Berlin office, only to find out that our bankers would give us no more money and wanted us to pay up the small amount we owed them that our letter of credit on London for 15,000 pounds sterling was no good; that Germany would probably declare war in 24 hours; that everything looked black; that everybody was panic stricken. I told my manager (Rothbeller) to cable New York for money, that I would go back to my "Kur" and remain unless Germany got into the war, in which event I would give up my Kur, return to Berlin, meet Steinberger, decide on our future course, and get to New York as soon as possible. I went back to St. Joschimetahl but remained only two days, as you know Germany got into the melee very quickly. In getting out I profited by my previous experience with the town bus and hired a caravan – a big lumbering farm wagon for baggage and a carriage for the maid and our little family. We had a picnic lunch along and so we proceeded along the high road, then the woods up and down the wooded hills until we got to the bottom of the hill leading up to the factory where, of course, we were again stopped, but this time I was prepared. I had gone over to Karlsbad and gotten our Consul there to give me a letter in which he stated that to the best of his knowledge I was a good man and entitled to the assistance and protection of all good citizens while engaged in lawful pursuits. It was the nearest thing he could give me to a passport which is issued by an accredited minister only, but he put a big red seal on the letter and a big blue seal on the envelope in which he placed it, and for the next few days it did a full-grown passport's work. I was allowed to go to the factory and on getting into communication ascertained that my presence there was necessary, so left at 5 o'clock to arrive at 12:40 A.M. that night. We changed cars three times, were informed that all trains would stop at 12 but that our train would run into Berlin and stop there. They saw a spy in every foreigner in those first few days of the mobilization, all bridges and public structures were guarded and when we crossed the Elbe after leaving Chemnitz an officer came to our compartment and told us to close all windows and sit up straight "sonnst wird geschossen!" {"otherwise, there will be shooting"} You can just bet we sat up straight and notwithstanding the heat we didn't open the windows or move until we had reached the next station. We learned that an attempt had been made to blow up an important bridge by throwing bombs from a car window, hence their care. Our train went rather slowly and increased in length at every station. It had become a military train, and we were taking on recruits. Such scenes of enthusiasm and patriotic ardor for service I have never witnessed.

At about 11:40 the cars with the soldiers were switched to another track and we were told to get out, that the train went no further that night. We were in Elsterwerda, if you know where that is, and how advanced it is you can judge from the fact they have only one sheet on the bed and the covering blanket is changed only when a new King ascends the throne, so the ones we slept under that night had done duty for 26 years. We got into Berlin on another military train at 5:40 the next day, using 26 hours for a trip that ordinarily takes 7, but not until I had been held up twice, once by a police sergeant and once by the bespectacled white whiskered Burgmaster of Elsterwerda but both were quieted and reassured that I wasn't an English spy when I showed them the Karlsbad Consul's muchly sealed letter – really they looked no further than the seals.

The mobilization of the German Army was next to the San Francisco fire, the most wonderful thing I have ever witnessed. In eight days, they moved 1,600,000 soldiers to their East and West borders. There was no drunkenness, in fact no alcoholic liquors, not even beer was obtainable at the stations. There was no confusion, every man knows just where to go, what to do and how to do it and for every man who went to the front there was another ready to take his place. This second 1,800,000 has already been called for since those first days and the third call is awaited with anxiety and impatience by those who are to answer it. Such unanimity of thought and action in a great nation I have never read of history or witnessed in my life. And the absolute precision of it all, no accidents, no camp epidemics, a new uniform and accoutrements complete for every single soldier, camp kitchens, hospitals simply marvelous, and with it all no panic, little or no advance in prices, no moratorium. The people looked determined but not excited. For a day or two the cutting of the cables bothered the bankers, but I took command of the situation in our business, as my poor old crazy partner refused to come to Berlin or to interrupt his "Kur"* and I had to stay there until he came back. In the meantime, though, I lost all chance of an early steamer to New York and up to a week before I left Berlin it looked as if November 7th would be the earliest date I could sail comfortably. When I look back on the first three weeks of my stay in Berlin, it seems that everything I did was just the only and the natural thing to do, and I am quite sure both my manager and my partner think that they would have done exactly what I did and just as well if not better. Every step required care, thought, deliberation, and they seemed sort of paralyzed. At any rate I managed to raise the necessary money, established, I firmly believe, the first cable communication with New York and received the first money, but best of all I managed to keep, or 1300 employees occupied and paid them their wages. The fathers, husbands and brothers are in the army and only the older men, the women and girls are left, and if we close down there will be much distress and in many cases something akin to starvation. We are working them half time so as to make our leather last as long as possible, as the raw material is scarce owing to the fact that the Government buys a great many of the skins and uses them as furs and fur linings for the soldiers.

The enforced stay in Berlin would not have been so bad if our bad luck on this trip had held off, but our dear Tess had to develop Gallstones and poor me had to just look on and see her suffer. Our doctor was a good one and did his best, but You know how you feel, when

Rose has asthma – or perhaps she doesn't have them anymore – I'd be awfully glad to hear that. After a while the attack work off, but our troubles were not yet ended because just about that time my partner came back. I had managed to secure accommodations in this ship, which originally expected to sail Oct. 3rd and knowing his mental condition I tried to avoid him, but one unfortunate day he cornered me and made such an outrageous scene that I had to make a legal complaint against him. I never went near the office again during my stay of three weeks longer and left before the case came up in court. You can of course imagine how such a thing, coming after a partnership of 38 years, and the effect it had on my sleep. The final effect on the business can at present only be guessed at. This little episode please keep to yourselves, but my hard luck story wouldn't be complete without it. We didn't leave Berlin until we had to, our people at the pension take such good care of us especially when any one is sick, and they make everything so homelike and comfortable that it is almost like leaving home when we go away. But on Sept. 29th we left Berlin and arrived at the Haag at 11 o'clock that night at the Hotel Central. Our rooms on the steamer were very, very bad so the first thing we did the following morning was to go over to Rotterdam and tried to change our berths, but it was only after we made the third visit there that we succeeded in getting our present comfortable room and bath. The hotels in the Haag were filled with passengers, also those in Rotterdam and Amsterdam, among others the Joe Hymans of Frisco, D.C. Rosenbaums of Stockton, Albert Mayer and his sister Mrs. Simon, Dr. and Mrs. Richter, Dr. Cohn & wife, etc. The lobby of our Hotel Central looked like the entrance to the synagogue on Sutter St. on Yom Kippur and you can imagine the excitement and commotion when we received notice from the company that the steamship was held up by the English Government and would probably not sail until the 14th. All kinds of rumors were floated, and the nervous strain on the thousands of Americans waiting to get out and get home was great, especially when all the subsequent steamers of the Holland American Line suffered the same fate as the Rotterdam, but all's well that ends well. We put in our time making little trips, visiting picture galleries, etc. and at last on Oct. 14th we set sail, with much anxiety through the mine fields of the North Sea and the English Channel. Of course, we had an English pilot aboard, but I notice that the S.S. company sent a large empty steamer in our wake to pick us up in case we ran on a mine, but nothing happened and here we are within a couple of days of shore and won't we be glad to take off our hats to the Goddess of Liberty when we reach the New York Harbor. The weather has been fair, our room is large and comfortable, but service and eating are indescribably bad. Ordinarily the ship carries 400-450 – 1st and 300 2nd, but this time she has 960 1st and 740 2nd. The last trip was even worse as she had then 1400 – 1st cabin. All their old cooks, who were French, have been called to arms. Their waiters of last year are in the Dutch army, and they have had to take anybody they could get. Of course, this is an emergency trip, and allowances should be made, but some of the things we see are inexcusable and our partiality for the Dutch line (we've come home on this ship now for the third time) is almost a thing of the past. I wonder if all this is interesting to you – it's been the longest three months I've ever known, and the starting point of June 27th seems like years ago.

Oct. 23rd – last night was the roughest I've ever experienced on board ship, nobody slept, the wind howled, the waves dashed over the vessel and at times she seemed to bend as though she must break. This morning is calmer, but the sea is still rough, and I won't have much company for breakfast.

I haven't said much to you about the war because of actual warfare I've seen nothing. After the mobilization things were quiet for a few days, then came the fall of Liege and then successes and the crowds paraded Under den Linden and sang Die Wacht am Rhein and Deuthschland, Deutschland uber alles, and stopped in front of the Crown Princes's Palace and cheered and sang until she brought out her boys. They were ecstatic with joy one evening when after showing the boys she asked them to please go home quietly because "die kleinenprinzen mochten yetst ruhig schlafen gehen." {"the little princes could now go to sleep peacefully"} But that isn't warfare, and these hurrahing crowds don't win battles of actual warfare I've seen nothing but it wasn't long before one began to see men and officers in uniform on the streets with pale faces and bandaged heads; some had crutches too and others in slings. One thing I must ask you to disbelieve, and that is the story of German Cruelties to noncombatants except in the few instances where it was necessary to stop guerilla warfare and the killing of wounded German soldiers. The cruelties were rather on the other side, and I have with me one of the English dum dum bullets {expanding bullets – to make a larger wound} given me by a German officer, which I may show you when I come out next year. Of course, I'm a partisan, I'm a natural born partisan. I can't see a dog fight in the streets without taking sides, and I'm pro-German to the backbone but I'm going to try to follow Pres. Wilson's excellent advice to act and talk, even to think neutrally when on this side of the Atlantic.

I'm glad to learn that the Exposition is not to be postponed. I'm "making propaganda" on this ship for it and telling people that if they'll spend their money in California next year, instead of going to Europe, the success of the exposition will be assured.

I hope the length of this letter is not altogether out of proportion to its interest and that you'll soon let us hear from you again.

Our love to you both and to your children and grandchildren (plural).

Affectionately yours,

{No signature as this appears to be a carbon copy, but it is from Edward Kalisher, Betty's father. Not sure who it is "to"....someone named Henry with a wife named Rose, who lives in San Francisco.}

*Kur: "Germany is possibly the only country in the world where struggling parents are legally entitled to a "Kur", a health retreat of about three weeks, every four years. A Kur is prescribed by a doctor, and mostly funded by insurance, meals, childcare and therapies

are all included.” This is of course the modern take on it....something similar in Edward’s day?