

## THE PODERJAY CASE

By Mark Chirnside, with Jack Wetton

On December 22<sup>nd</sup> 1933, *Olympic* departed from New York for her thirteenth and final eastbound crossing of the year. Christmas would be celebrated in three days' time, yet eastbound passenger lists always seemed to be less than for the westbound crossing, and *Olympic's* depression-era passenger list was less than three hundred: 87 first class, 104 tourist class and 82 third class. It was even lower than her average passenger lists that year. *Olympic* completed the 3,028 mile passage in five days eighteen hours and fifty-four minutes, at an average speed of 21.8 knots, yet despite appearances this was hardly a normal voyage – for there was a suspected murderer onboard.



Right: Mr. Ivan Poderjay (born 1899) travelled to Belgrade as a young man, where he attempted to become a professional fortune teller. Presumably, he decided against it or failed to make a living from it, as he subsequently joined the French Foreign Legion. John D Wetton's research indicates that Poderjay deserted soon after joining and subsequently described himself as a Captain in the Yugoslavian Army. Even today, the Legion were reluctant to respond to John's queries. (Courtesy *Chicago Tribune*.)



Left: American (New York) Attorney Miss. Agnes Tufvertson vanished in mysterious circumstances. (Courtesy *Chicago Tribune*/Associated Press)

Described as a ‘dashing Jugo Slavian [sic] officer,’ Captain Ivan Poderjay was arrested in Vienna on the night of June 13<sup>th</sup> 1934. Austrian police held him pending information from New York, as part of an ongoing investigation into the disappearance of Miss. Agnes Tufvertson of Chicago. Poderjay told police that he and Agnes had met in July 1933 on a boat train in Britain, and that ‘Miss Tufvertson suggested that they marry as a matter of convenience in order to spare her the pain of returning to New York [as] a spinster.’ Unfortunately, he was already married – since he had wed Miss. Marguerite Suzanne Ferrand in London on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1933. Although some sources give the year as ‘1932,’ the marriage certificate confirms the correct date, stating: ‘marriage solemnized at [the] register office in the district of Paddington in the court of London.’ Poderjay’s profession was given as a retired ‘Yugo Slav’ [sic] Captain, while the certificate reveals that his father was also called Ivan Poderjay.

Poderjay claimed that Miss. Tufvertson was aware of his previous marriage and wanted to go ahead with the ceremony anyway. Researcher John D Wetton has delved into the story and writes that Poderjay:

‘latched on to her and they dated in London – he spent over £500 of his own money on showing her a good time. The investment paid off because she trusted him with

\$5,000 (which he promised to invest for her). By the time she returned to New York, Agnes was telling her friends that she knew a "Yugoslavian millionaire." Poderjay wrote to hook another \$5,000 from her, but she was reluctant to give him any more money until he came to see her - not because she doubted him, but because she was besotted with him and eager for his presence. He arrived in Nov. 1933 and they were married on Dec. 4<sup>th</sup>.'

Following the marriage the two were booked from New York to sail on the liner *Hamburg* for a honeymoon trip on December 20<sup>th</sup> 1933, yet neither of them ever boarded the liner. Instead, Poderjay sailed 'as a single man' on the *Olympic* when she departed two days later. Curiously, relatives of Miss. Tufvertson discovered that she had withdrawn \$25,000 in cash from the bank on the day that she had originally planned to sail. Nothing was heard from her until January 2<sup>nd</sup> 1934, when a telegram bearing her name was sent from London to Miss Tufvertson's sisters Olive and Sally Tufvertson in Detroit:

'Bad crossing. Cannot stand fog. Sailing India across France from Marseilles. Eyes better. Happiness to you all through the year.'

Yet if the telegram purporting to come from her might have eased any worries as to her apparent disappearance, that crumb of comfort was dispelled as time passed, and by June 15<sup>th</sup> 1934 the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported that no one had heard from her since the telegram had been sent. Another of her sisters, Mrs. Lester L. Rapp, spoke to reporters on behalf of her relatives:

'We are afraid for my sister. Living persons do not vanish into the air. But one thing we are certain; that is, Agnes never would take her own life. She was of optimistic disposition, she had won success in life and had everything to live for. Anyway, she is just not the type to commit suicide.'

By June 16<sup>th</sup> 1934, New York police were searching and interviewing baggage room employees in Manhattan, since a large trunk and other luggage had been observed with Poderjay around the time of his wife's disappearance. Questioning one of the *Olympic's* stewards, police learned that Poderjay had spent 'virtually the entire trip to Southampton' in his cabin where 'he had placed a large amount of luggage.' Two days later, parts of a dismembered body of a woman were found in a railway station in Brighton; the body's legs had already been found in a suitcase left at London's King's Cross railway station on June 7<sup>th</sup> 1934. While exploring all possibilities, American detectives cast doubt on the view that the body was that of Miss Tufvertson, since she had undergone an abdominal operation which had left her with

a scar and the body had no scar. While the torso found at Brighton was estimated to be that of a forty-year old woman, around five feet two or three inches high, Agnes was aged forty-three and somewhat taller with a height of five feet six inches – weighing a fairly trim 135 pounds. In the event, it was established that the body was somebody else.

On the same day, June 18<sup>th</sup> 1934, police in Vienna announced that they believed Miss. Tufvertson was dead. They had discovered a ‘trunk, briefcase and other property’ belonging to her in Poderjay’s apartment, including ‘half a dozen dresses, an amber necklace, two strands of pearls and two books, one on the art of love, and the other on birth control.’ Meanwhile, Poderjay abandoned his story that his marriage to Agnes had been bigamous, and police detained Miss. Marguerite Suzanne Ferran\* (who had lived with Poderjay in Vienna). She told police that he had told her that Miss. Tufvertson had given him ‘the trunk and its contents as a parting gift before she left on a world cruise.’ According to the *Chicago Daily Tribune*:

‘She protested her loyalty to Poderjay and said that he told her he never married Miss. Tufvertson at all, but was only a “good friend,” good enough for her to give him the trunk and its contents, which included the red dress Miss. Ferren was wearing when Poderjay was arrested.

‘Poderjay, faced with these developments, changed his story about the marriage.

‘He said his marriage to Miss. Ferran in London was not “registered” and therefore was “illegal.” Previously he had insisted he married Miss. Tufvertson although already wed to Miss. Ferran to save her from spinsterhood, at her own request.

‘Today’s search of the apartment disclosed the Tufvertson property despite the fact that the place had been looked over before and nothing had been found.’

John D Wetton’s research sheds light on the nature of Poderjay’s relationship with Ferran:

‘Poderjay’s first officially-recorded escapade as a seducer (and despoiler) of women was in 1926. He followed this trade afterwards and made a fairly good living from it. In 1931, he met a woman called Marguerite Suzanne Ferrand – she was a research assistant at the British Museum and secretly a vicious sadist. Poderjay was a masochist and he was hooked by

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\* This name is variously reported as ‘Ferran,’ ‘Ferren,’ or ‘Ferrand’ (which seems the most accurate).

the beating sessions she dished out to him. They were married... - though he was already married (several times over). The ruthless nature of his new wife influenced his methods - she did not object to his "career" and evidently taught him the value of being merciless.'

In Belgrade, reports surfaced that a local woman, Mme. Zhivka, had produced documents to 'show that she was married to Captain Ivan Poderjay on October 13<sup>th</sup> 1926, and was granted a divorce on November 16<sup>th</sup> 1933' - the month before Poderjay's marriage to Miss. Tufvertson. Poderjay clearly had a way with the ladies:

'Mme. Zhivka, a tall, slender blond, recalled the romantic Captain, now in jail in Vienna, with undisguised affection. She was eager for news of him and blamed his trouble on the women with whom he was living in Vienna, Susanne [sic] Ferran.


'She said that \$10,000 disappeared from her safe deposit box about the time Poderjay left Jugo-Slavia [sic].'

Seeking to shed some light on Poderjay, police found 'more than 1,000 erotic drawings' in his apartment in Vienna, which were carefully 'studied by police' on June 21<sup>st</sup> 1934.† It was discovered that he had purchased 'a quantity of sleeping powder' the day before his wife vanished, while he had tried to court Miss Helen Vogel at the same time as he had been wooing his wife. The same day Poderjay had bought sleeping powder, he and his wife had 'quarrelled over his "wild extravagancies".'

Police went onboard the *Olympic* in New York, three days prior to her scheduled June 29<sup>th</sup> 1934 departure with 501 passengers. It was reported that they had made some significant discoveries, even though Poderjay had sailed on the ship six months before. Poderjay's cabin was C86, and had its own porthole. When detectives measured the porthole they found that it was about twenty inches in diameter - 'easily large enough for an average sized woman's body to pass through, even without dismembering.'

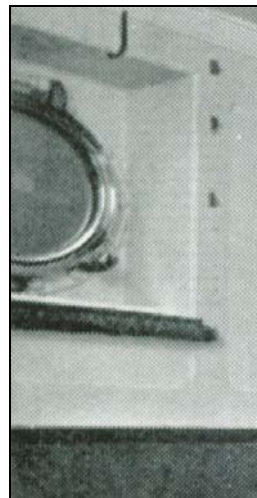
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† A March 7<sup>th</sup> 1935 Metropolitan Police report, of the Criminal Investigation Department at New Scotland Yard, described the sketches as 'obscene sketches of persons practising unnatural sexual intercourse and the contents were often very immoral. It was evident therefrom [sic] that Poderjay is inclined to masochism and that his wife is sadistic.' The report stated that 'in the Poderjay's [sic] apartment was found a number of whips, a chastity belt, and other instruments obviously used by them in carrying out their sexual practices.'

MALE.		REGISTRATION CARD.		P80	
(1) NAME (Surname first in Roman capitals). <b>PODERJAY Ivan</b>		(1) IDENTIFICATION OR REGISTRATION CERTIFICATE. <b>461920</b>			
ALIAS		No. <b>10th March 1931</b> Issued at: <b>Bow St.</b>			
(3) NATIONALITY <b>Yugo Slav</b> Born on <b>12th May 1899</b> in <b>Ljubljana</b>		(6) Arrived in U.K. on <b>26/2/1931</b>			
(4) PREVIOUS NATIONALITY (if any) <b>Serbian</b>		<b>HARWICH</b>			
(5) PROFESSION or OCCUPATION <b>Inventor (Keys)</b>		<b>Grand Hotel Copenhagen</b>			
(7) Address of last residence outside U.K.		(11) SIGNATURE OR LEFT THUMB PRINT. <b>Ivan Poderjay</b>			
(8) GOVERNMENT SERVICE.		(10) PHOTOGRAPH. 			
(9) PASSPORT or other papers as to nationality and identity. <b>Yugo Slav Rep.</b> <b>N° 4426 issued on 18.7.1928 in Belgrade</b>		<b>3/31</b> <b>10/3/31</b>			

Above: Poderjay's registration card was issued after his arrival in the United Kingdom on February 26<sup>th</sup> 1931. Among the interesting information is his previous nationality, his description of his occupation as an 'inventor' of keys, and the fact that he had stayed at Copenhagen's Grand Hotel before arriving. His photo makes him appear older than he appears in the previous photo of him in uniform, where Poderjay looks 'baby faced.' In December 1934, a British police report stated that 'it is clear that both Poderjay and Ferrand are extremely undesirable aliens and these facts are submitted with a view to due consideration being given to the question of preventing their return to this country.' (Courtesy National Archives [MEPO 3/1446]; material in the copyright of the Metropolitan Police reproduced by kind permission of the Metropolitan Police Authority.)

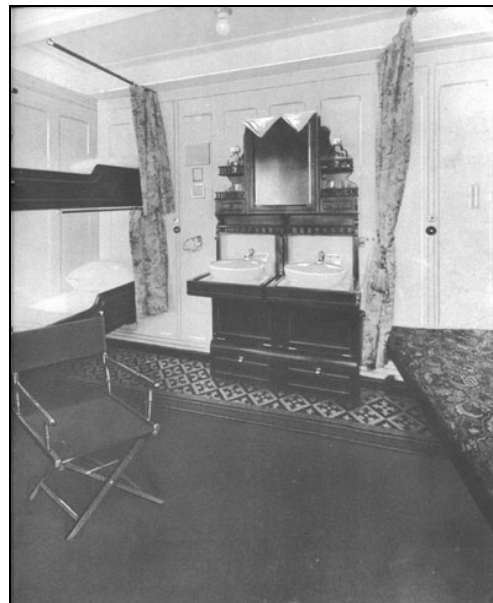
Right: One porthole in a tourist class cabin onboard *Olympic*, which would have been similar in appearance to the inside of the porthole in Poderjay's cabin. (Author's collection)



Top right: This photograph shows the starboard counterpart of C86 earlier in the *Olympic*'s life. It has been flipped to indicate exactly how C86 would have appeared, with the porthole on the left. By the time of Poderjay's voyage, the riveted metal ceiling would most probably have been covered so it was flush with the white wall panels to enhance the cabin's appearance. (Courtesy Daniel Klistorner collection)

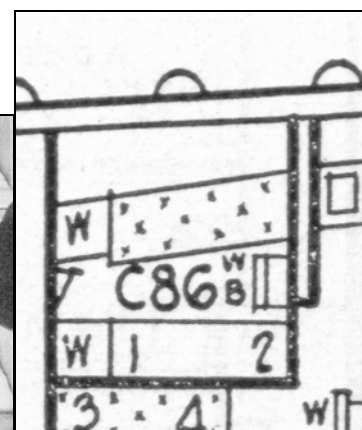
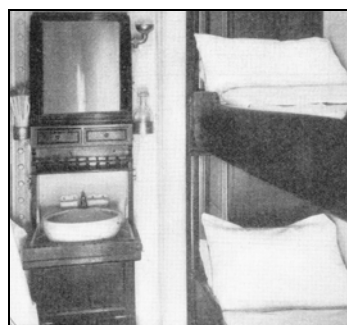


Middle Right: By 1933 *Olympic* had seen a number of changes over her twenty-two years of arduous service. This photo depicts a cabin larger than Poderjay's and was taken some time after 1928, showing some of the changes (including the ceiling) that occurred over time. By the end of the 1920s, D-deck had become C-deck and thus the original D86 became C86.

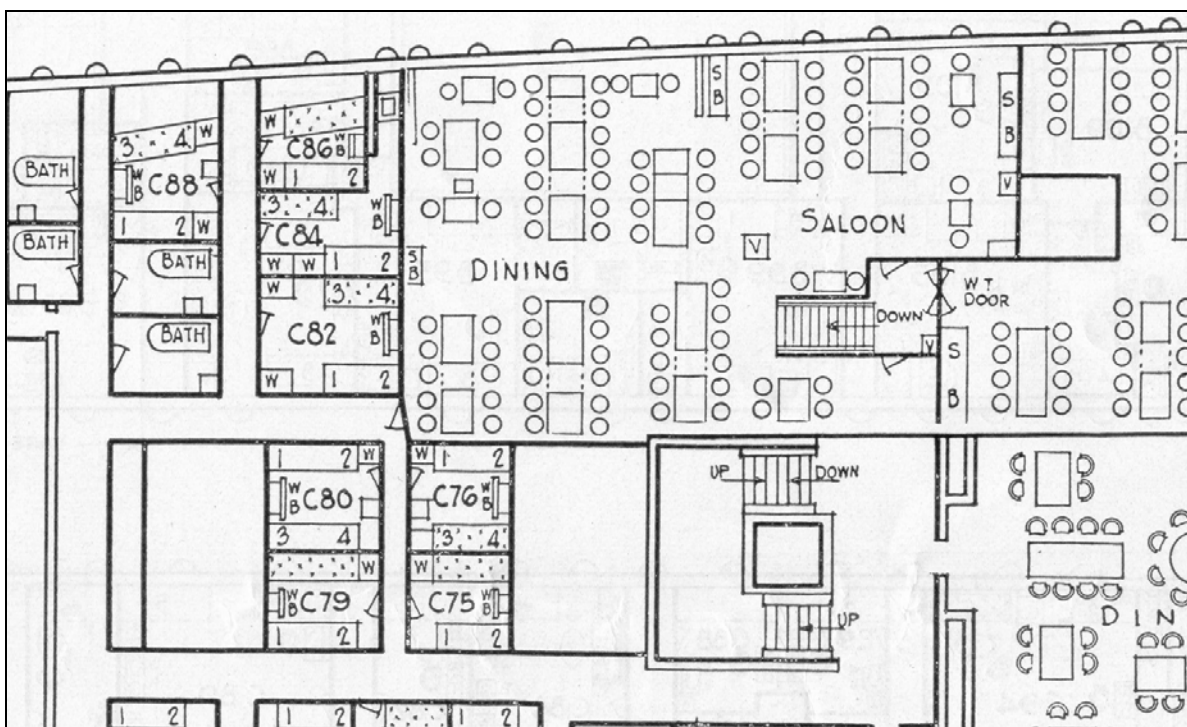


In turn, at the time of Poderjay's voyage second class had been entirely replaced by tourist class and so C86 was designated a tourist class cabin. (Courtesy, Daniel Klistorner collection)

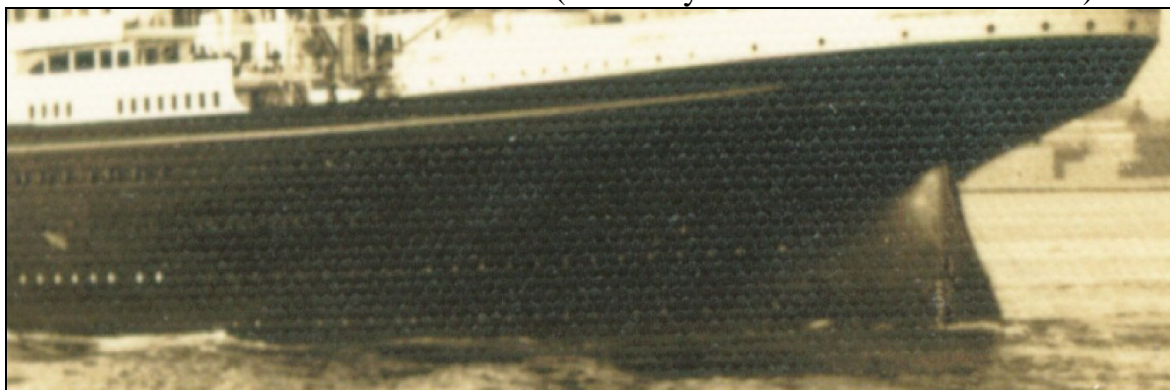
Lower right: A washstand identical to Poderjay's; and a 1931 plan showing C86's layout. The 'W's' represent wardrobes, with the single wash basin in the middle. (Courtesy Günter Bäbler collection)







Above: Poderjay's cabin C86 is visible in the top left quarter of this 1931 deck plan. It shows the division of the original second class dining saloon – after the 1927-28 refit the port side was used for tourist class and the starboard side for second class. By October 1931, second class had been entirely replaced by tourist yet the bulkhead was never removed and the port side appears to have been used for third class and the starboard side for tourist class. Forward of Poderjay's cabin, the smaller dining saloon was constructed in the 1927-28 refit for tourist class passengers, and has variously been described (or used) as a dining saloon, dance floor and lounge or recreation room according to references from 1928 to 1935. (Courtesy Günter Bäßler collection)



Above: While it is difficult to distinguish individual portholes that are not emphasized by the deadlights, the lighting of the photograph, or installed where the ship's exterior is white-painted, this view of the port side of the ship dates from the *Olympic's* final years of service. The porthole for cabin C86 is situated immediately below the foremost end of the poop deck. (Author's collection)





Above: Taken at Southampton the month before the police inspected *Olympic* in New York, many portholes are visible. Although this shows the starboard side of the ship, it does give a good idea of the location of Poderjay's cabin in relation to the stern. Assuming *Olympic* was making twenty-two knots, she would be racing through the water at around 37 feet per second. Any objects thrown out of the porthole would soon pass into the ship's wake, yet the number of outside cabins beneath Poderjay's would seem to make the need for the cover of darkness all the more necessary. (Author's collection)

After police had examined the *Olympic*, one Chicago newspaper report went into great detail as to another development:

'The second development was an answer to the question, "Did Poderjay have time to pass any articles or packages out of the porthole to the bottom of the sea before he opened a trunk to the gaze of a steward?"

'The answer is "Yes."

'Until tonight, it was not known on what day of the voyage Poderjay took pains to show the stewards he had nothing concealed in the trunk, although he refused to leave his stateroom, ate all his meals in his cabin, and guarded the trunk as if it were full of valuables.

'Ernest Churcher, Cabin Steward to Poderjay, disclosed during a police examination after the *Olympic* docked this evening, that it was at noon on December 23<sup>rd</sup> [1933] that Poderjay opened the guarded trunk, pulled out a necktie and drew out a draw convincing the Steward that the trunk contained only wearing apparel. The *Olympic* had sailed at 10 o'clock the night before. This meant that Poderjay had all night and all morning to have rid himself of any object or package he wished to destroy.

#### **'Well Out To Sea**

'During the late hours of the night and the early hours of the morning, the *Olympic* was well out to sea, and heavy objects cast off would not be likely to find their way ashore.

'Beyond these more or less theoretical points, the police apparently did not gain much data of importance through their minute search of the Poderjay cabin. It was, however, an elaborate search, conducted by a group of ten experts, headed by Capt. John H. Ayres of the missing persons bureau; Dr. A. O. Gettier, city toxicologist, and Detective Lieutenant William McMahon of the police research laboratory. The police were accompanied by Sally Tufvertson, sister of the missing bride, who evinced keen interest in the search of the cabin. The delegation was armed with chemicals and high powered lights. The experts proceeded to search the cabin, the doors, the porthole and the furniture for any signs of blood or other clues [sic].

#### **'Cabin Cleaned Several Times**

'They were handicapped by the lapse of time and the fact that the cabin had been given several thorough cleanings since Poderjay occupied it last December. However, the experts believed that if a body had been dismembered or handled in the cabin the chemicals would establish some trace. It was admitted, nevertheless, that if a body had been dismembered elsewhere and brought aboard well wrapped up it would have been possible to pass it through the porthole without leaving any telltale marks.

'The police experts also gave some attention to a closet which fits in at the end of two berths in the cabin. The interior of the closet measures about five feet high by two feet wide. It was pointed out that if any person had sailed alive and been overcome the night of the sailing, it would have been an easy matter for the victim to have been placed temporarily in this closet. The entrance was

also wide enough to admit a steamer trunk, such as Poderjay carried away from Miss Tufvertson's apartment shortly before sailing time.

**'Mentions "Charming Woman"**

'The Steward said Poderjay mentioned to him that he had left "a very charming woman behind in America," and volunteered the information that he had married two different women, but he explained this was in different countries and he felt safe from the law. Poderjay seemed to be well supplied with money and displayed numerous \$10 and \$20 bills.'

'One of the police theories,' writes John D Wetton, 'about his method of disposing of Agnes' body is that he stripped the flesh from her bones and literally fed the fish which followed the liner. Poderjay had bought eight hundred razorblades in New York – the cops thought they were for cutting up Agnes, he said that they were bought in bulk because they were so much cheaper in America.' However, this does seem unduly messy in light of the fact that the *Olympic* cabin would have been stained, and Agnes' sister's opinion that she had been drugged and then thrown out of the porthole would seem to be more likely.

Police Lieutenant Hugh Sheridan visited Boston, interviewing Mrs. Ruth Hall who was employed in a cleaning and dyeing shop. Mrs. Hall was 'certain' that she had seen Miss. Tufvertson 'twice since last May 15<sup>th</sup>' 1934 – which would have made the first sighting of her since her disappearance had it been corroborated. Weather bureau data showed that the weather had been cold and dismal on the night of her disappearance, while her maid 'remembered that between 10 and 11 o'clock that evening, when she left the Tufvertson apartment at 235 East 22<sup>nd</sup> Street, Poderjay and his bride were together in the rooms.'

By June 29<sup>th</sup> 1934 Poderjay's story reached New York police from Vienna. Captain Ayers described the statement as 'a few facts interlarded with a mass of contradictions.' He told reporters:

'Poderjay says Miss. Tufvertson gave him 1,200,000 dinars' worth of securities to sell in London in July, 1933. That's a lie. He tried to get her to store that amount of Yugoslavian securities in her safe deposit box, here, but she refused. She was suspicious of those securities. We know she said to certain of her friends at the time, "Wouldn't I look fine holding those securities in my possession without knowing where they came from?" Remember, she was a mighty clever lawyer.'

Poderjay had never made reservations for the *Hamburg*, it emerged, despite telling Miss. Tufvertson that he had; nor could he account for her possessions being with him in Vienna. Poderjay had said that she had left the apartment at 9 a.m. on December 20<sup>th</sup> 1933, heading for Montreal and telling him that she would call when she arrived, but failed to do so. Yet she had received an indemnity cheque at 9 a.m., while she was at the hairdresser's between 2 and 2.30 p.m., where 'she got a cheque cashed.' Ayers believed she could not have left the hairdresser's before 4 p.m. Witnesses had seen them on the Hamburg-Amerika Line's pier that day, after she left the hairdresser, and then there was the maid's sighting of the pair that evening. He also discounted the sighting of Miss. Tufvertson in May 1934.

Unfortunately, the police investigation failed to find anything onboard the *Olympic* stateroom, but her sister Miss. Sally Tufvertson was convinced something was amiss:

'If she was going to Canada that day, as he says, do you think she'd have left her fur coat behind?

'I know she had no other fur coat because she sent two coats out to us in Detroit. And the 20<sup>th</sup> of December was a sleety, cold and miserable day.

'I think my sister lies at the bottom of the Atlantic. I think she was drugged and doped and thrown out of that porthole of the *Olympic*.'

By January 30<sup>th</sup> 1935, after several legal obstacles, Poderjay had been extradited to America and was in the General Sessions court in New York to plead guilty on the charge of his 'bigamous marriage with Agnes Tufvertson.' Eventually, he accepted 'the services of a lawyer appointed by the court' and was remanded in custody. Assistant District Attorney Harold W. Hastings had stated that he would oppose bail as Poderjay was 'suspected of homicide.' On March 21<sup>st</sup> 1935, the now thirty-five-year old Poderjay was sentenced to between two-and-a-half and five years in prison on the charge of bigamy, by General Sessions Judge George L. Donellan. It was reported in Chicago:

#### **'Hints from Bench**

'Before imposing sentence Judge Donellan said:

"It is my judgement that this defendant should be before this court on another charge."

'Poderjay took the sentence calmly. He stood in his favourite attitude - with folded arms - and gave no sign of emotion. He did not, however, look quite as bored as he has at previous court sessions.

'Irving W. Halpern, Chief Probation Officer, declared in his report that Miss. Tufvertson's disappearance "was not voluntary, but directly caused by the defendant, who

had no affection for her and could profit financially by her wealth." '

On October 4<sup>th</sup> 1936 it was reported that Poderjay, in New York's Auburn prison, 'must serve out the full five year sentence' he had been given according to the state parole commission. He was 'at one time suspected by police of having slain his missing wife, an attorney,' the reporter concluded.

Released from prison on February 1<sup>st</sup> 1940, by which time he had lost the sight in his right eye (and eight teeth) following a fight with another prisoner two years previously, Poderjay 'refused to answer questions concerning his missing bride.' No trace of Miss. Tufvertson had ever been found. Nine days later he was deported to Yugoslavia on the liner *Washington*. John D Wetton comments: 'When released, he returned to Marguerite and they lived in Belgrade.'

It will probably never be known what precisely happened to the unfortunate Miss. Agnes Tufvertson. Was she murdered or sent overboard on the *Olympic* sometime between December 22<sup>nd</sup> and December 23<sup>rd</sup> 1933? She certainly disappeared, and in light of the evidence and Poderjay's history it does seem all too likely. It seems doubtful she was murdered onboard, yet the evidence that her body was disposed of by Poderjay seems very strong indeed. While this incident might be well-known had it occurred in 1911, all too much of *Olympic*'s post-war history is often shrouded in mystery. Those who believe we know all there is to know about this fine ship are surely mistaken. Even though she did not sink, she was sometimes the scene for human tragedy.‡

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thanks are due to George Behe for reading through an early draft of the article and alerting me to a few errors; Günter Bäßler for generously sharing photographs and the deck plan from his collection; Daniel Klistorner for his kindness in allowing me to use photographs from his collection; Ian Lamerton for letting me know about a fruitful source of research for events related to Chicago; and of course John D Wetton for his generosity in sharing research material and his willingness to combine forces to tell the story of the alleged 'murder on the *Olympic*.'

[www.markchirnside.co.uk](http://www.markchirnside.co.uk)

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‡ As an interesting footnote to the story, recently Marks & Spencer have sold a murder mystery game called 'The Porthole Affair' – produced by Cheatwell games and made in China. Set in 1935, the murder mystery takes place onboard the *Olympic* – this time on a westbound crossing to New York. The victims are the aptly-named Hal. E. Tossis, a 'wealthy dental surgeon' and son Hal. E. Tossis Junior. Among the evidence is a bottle of poison, a suicide note, and a locked cabin with a rope dangling from the porthole. The game's cover uses a picture of *Aquitania* to illustrate *Olympic*!