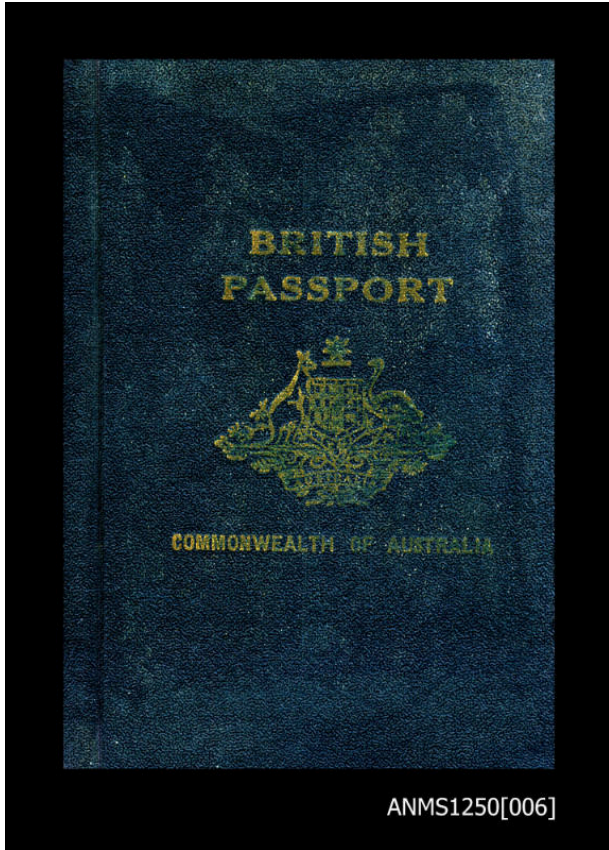


Basic Detail Report



ANMS1250[006]

Title

Nancy Speck's British Passport

Date

1950

Primary Maker

Oskar Speck

Medium

Ink on paper

Dimensions

150 x 105 x 5 mm

Name

Passport

History

50,000 KM BY KAYAK By Penny Cuthbert, Curator,

Australian National Maritime Museum. Reproduced courtesy of the Australian National Maritime Museum. The article first appeared in the museum's quarterly journal *Signals* (No 58, March 2002). The Australian National Maritime Museum gratefully acknowledges interviews with Oskar Speck by Duncan Thompson in the *Australasian Post* (1956) and Margot Cuthill for SBS Television, on which part of this article is based. Copyright Australian National Maritime Museum. This article may not be reproduced in part or whole, in any form, without permission from the Australian National Maritime Museum. Contact the publications manager tel 61 2 9298 3647 fax 61 2 9298 3670 email jmellefont@anmm.gov.au IN DECEMBER 2001 the Museum unveiled its new core exhibition *WATERMARKS* adventure sport play. One of its defining themes, *Voyagers*, salutes individuals who challenge themselves on the world's oceans and waterways. And here we tell the remarkable story of German adventurer-voyager-migrant Oskar Speck and his 50,000-kilometre odyssey, paddling a kayak to Australia in the 1930s. The voyage would take an unprecedented seven years and four months before Speck reached his final destination. Speck's story can be pieced together from newspaper articles, his letters, diaries, photographs, passports and 16-mm film footage, from rare media interviews that he gave and through the testimony of those who knew him. From these disparate sources emerges the picture of a complex man whose voyage to Australia through a colonial world epitomized an age of wanderlust. Yet for Speck this voyage was more than just adventure. It was the beginning of a new life far from his homeland. Oskar Speck was born in 1907 and grew up at a time when the world was in turmoil and transition. His childhood and adolescence in Hamburg were shaped by the First World War and the economic and social changes resulting from Germany's defeat. As a young man

Speck worked as an electrical contractor running a factory with 21 employees. He was a keen competitive kayaker before 1932 and a member of a boating club. Canoeing and kayaking were popular summer pastimes in Europe and Weimar Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. Collapsible kayaks (faltboot) could be easily carried on public transport to be reassembled for use on rivers and waterways. Speck owned his own folding kayak Sunnschien. This outdoor spirit reflected a Germanic passion for athleticism and physical prowess - qualities reinforced in youth clubs and associations. In 1932, during the Depression, Speck's business closed and he found himself unemployed along with millions of other Germans. This closure afforded him the opportunity to pursue two of his interests - geology and kayaking. Seeing no future at home Speck sought work in the copper mines of Cyprus (Oskar Speck in interview with Duncan Thompson Australasian Post, December 6 1956). 'The times in Germany were very catastrophic...all I wanted was to get out of Germany for a while' Speck has said in an interview recorded by Margot Cuthill for Australia's SBS TV in 1987. 'I had no idea that I would eventually end up in Australia...but I took my collapsible boat, went to Ulm and then down the Danube to the Yugoslavian border...leaving Germany and seeing the world seemed like a better option.' The kayak Sunnschien was a double kayak - for two paddlers - converted for one to make room for luggage and provisions. Its light, flexible wooden frame made it safe for shooting rapids, light for portage and could be collapsed into a small bundle when necessary. It was constructed from a laminated rubber and canvas skin over the frame and was 5.49 m in length, capable of carrying a load of nearly 300 kg. It was steered by a foot-controlled rudder and propelled by a double-ended paddle. It was equipped with a small gaff sail with an area of 1.49 square metres. Speck's luggage consisted of a spare paddle, two brass waterproof containers for his films, cameras, clothing, documents, coastal pilots, passports, charts and prismatic compass, and pistol. Fresh water was contained in five-gallon tanks shaped to the side of the kayak. When water was unreliable coconuts provided a much needed drink. He ate local fare where possible and supplemented this with tinned meat, fish and condensed milk.(Oskar Speck in interview with Duncan Thompson Australasian Post, December 6 1956). The leaving With a small amount of money, some raised by his family, the 25-year-old Speck set off on a bus from Hamburg to Ulm on the Danube River. This modern-day odyssey began on 13 May 1932 as a river journey along the still waters of the Danube and would take him first to the Mediterranean coast. From the start Speck sought the challenges of white water and rapids. Finding the Danube too tame he decided to travel to Skopje (in what was then Macedonia) to test his skills on the rapids of the Varda River. His five-year-old kayak was damaged in the attempt. He made repairs in Veles while waiting for the frozen river to melt and continued to the Mediterranean coast. Speck was kept in touch with political events in Germany through letters from family and friends. 'We have had another round of elections last Sunday. I think it was the fifth this year. The result is nil. The Nazis lost a bit and the Communists gained a bit...everybody is keen to follow your 'around the world trip'...if you don't manage to enter Turkey etc try Russia - they are looking for trades people - only in case of emergency though' (Letter from Speck's younger brother Heinrich 10 November 1932.) Rivers to Ocean To cross the Mediterranean, Speck had to master sailing and paddling during voyages between Greek islands. This involved greater reliance on steering with a foot operated rudder and use of a sail. 'by all sane standards I was mad ... Faltboats are not built for the sea... you may sail while the weather is kind, but you must be constantly active, constantly steering to bring the boat's bow to the right position to meet every single wave' .(Oskar Speck in interview with Duncan Thompson Australasian Post, December 6 1956). While Speck described his kayak as 'a first class ticket to everywhere' the reality

of travelling in such a small craft was that he had to paddle close to coastline wherever possible. On shore he slept in the kayak after removing the tanks from the bow and stern to make more room. A makeshift canvas canopy provided shelter from the sun. On the open sea there was no chance to sleep. To do so would risk capsizing or worse. Speck described paddling a kayak on the open sea like riding a bicycle on the land 'you must keep pedaling and steering or you fall over...in a faltboot you must be constantly steering to bring the boat's bow to the right position to meet every single wave.' During the voyage Speck capsized a number of times when surfing into shore. The fact he survived such a perilous voyage is all the more remarkable given that Speck could not swim. He strapped himself into his kayak. The Near East From Rhodes Speck followed the coast of Turkey, crossing from Anamur to Cyprus, a distance of 45 nautical miles. (Oskar Speck in interview with Margaret Cuthill for Australia's SBS TV in 1987) It was in Cyprus that Speck's plans took an important turn. Although an interest in minerals and the prospect of work in the copper mines had led him to Cyprus, he decided instead to continue his travels. 'I decided that Suez offered a too well beaten path - why not land on the Syrian coast and take the bus to Meskene on the upper Euphrates...' (Oskar Speck in interview with Duncan Thompson Australasian Post, December 13 1956). True to his word Speck landed at Latakia after two days at sea. Speck continued down the Euphrates River into the Shatt al Arab (the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers) and then to Al Basrah. From the Shatt Al Arab, Speck crossed the Persian Gulf to Iran. 'Everywhere I went I was surrounded by crowds of people...no-one had ever seen this type of boat before,' Speck recalled in Margaret Cuthill's 1987 SBS interview. The manufacturer of his kayak, Pionier Faltboot Werft in Bad Tolz, supplied Speck with four of the craft over the seven-year voyage, becoming his main sponsor. While waiting in Bandar Abbas, Iran, for his first replacement kayak Speck contracted malaria, which would afflict him periodically during the voyage. (Margaret Cuthill SBS interview, 1987). As he coasted along the head of the Arabian Sea, Speck's kayak and possessions were stolen at the border of Iran and Pakistan. He told the police there was money in his kayak, and the following day they directed him to it. 'we came upon a dhow, and there across its bow lay my kayak. Not a thing in it had been touched.' (Oskar Speck in interview with Duncan Thompson Australasian Post, December 13 1956). Speck bought it back for forty pounds. India and the tropics During his stay in British Baluchistan (Pakistan) Speck met the Governor, Sir Norman Carter, on a beach. He was invited to join the Governor who was being entertained by the Maharajas of Kalat and Las Bellas on a shooting party. Speck continued to follow the Indian coast and in Bombay (Mumbai) With local support Speck was able to give public talks to help fund his journey. In Madras (Chennai) Speck was contacted by the North Madras Boy Scouts Association who were keen to entertain him. Here he waited for a new kayak before paddling around the shores of the Bay of Bengal. Speck was encouraged by friends to try out for the Berlin Olympics in kayaking events. ' Kette is about to release the Olympic racing boat in single and double version. That is an indication for paddling races to be run in the Berlin Olympics. Why don't you take part in that? You should be in a state to win a trophy in Germany.' (Letter to Oskar Speck from friend in Altona, 15 April 1935). The following year while in Burma Speck attempted to qualify for the Berlin Olympics in the 10,000-metre kayaking event but was unable to make the required times. (Margaret Cuthill SBS interview, 1987) He continued this travels which took him down the west coast of Thailand's Isthmus of Kra and peninsular Malaya. Reaching Singapore via the Straits of Malacca Speck collected another kayak and paddled and sailed his way through the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia). In Java he acquired a 16-mm cine-camera. The surviving ethnographic footage taken in

1938-39 details the cultural diversity of people Speck encountered living beyond the Java Sea through to the New Guinea mainland and islands. It transports the viewer into a world of coastal village life, much of which has changed dramatically since this film was shot over sixty years ago. While still recovering from a severe bout of malaria Speck left Bali for Lombok. The rigours of the crossing induced a relapse. Speck was cared for and then received by the Kepala Kampong (village chief). After reaching Lakor Island in the Moluccas, Speck was woken one night by 20 people armed with spears, swords and machetes. He temporarily kept them at bay by brandishing an unloaded pistol but was soon dragged from his kayak and bound hand and foot with buffalo hide while his kayak was looted. Speck was slapped and kicked in the head, resulting in a burst ear drum. After several hours Speck managed to loosen his bindings and slip back to his kayak, retrieving the largest tank which held his camera, films and clothing. Australasian waters In a new kayak Speck crossed from the Kai Islands in the Banda Sea to the Dutch New Guinea coast, a distance of 200 km covered in 34 hours (Margaret Cuthill SBS interview, 1987). His arrival in Dutch territory caused a dilemma for the local administrator who was unsure whether to arrest Speck or grant a travel permit. After a delay a permit was issued and Speck followed the coast of Hollandia to Madang, filming communities along the way. At Samarai Island he stayed with the O'Donnells, an Australian family who operated the local coastal radio station. In a recent oral history interview Bill and John O'Donnell, children at the time, remember listening to a shortwave radio broadcast of Adolf Hitler with Speck and their parents. The following morning the family watched Speck depart Samarai Island from the beach near their house. Speck also stayed with missionaries at Orokolo (New Guinea) while he repaired his damaged rudder. In Daru (New Guinea) Speck learned from fishermen that Australia was at war with Germany. Local authorities allowed him to continue into the Torres Strait to Saibai and then Thursday Island where he was arrested as an enemy alien. His arrival on Thursday Island in September 1939 was photographed by Siri Mendis, a young Sri Lankan living there who remembers the event and has spoken to the Museum about it. The surprising arrival of Speck and camera in wartime raised questions about his activities in the region, why and for whom he was making a film and whether he was acting as an agent for the Germans. Police were suspicious of the contents of Speck's film footage and asked Mendis to view the film in his dark room. Mendis was also present when Speck was interrogated by police. Interned in Australia Speck spent a month on Thursday Island before being transferred by the RAN to Brisbane. From Queensland he was sent to Tatura Internment Camp in the Goulburn Valley of Victoria. On the 9 January 1943 Speck escaped from the camp. He had made a pact with his friend and fellow internee Frederick Embritz to escape and meet in Sydney outside Randwick race course. While Embritz made the rendezvous at Randwick, Speck never arrived. He was on the run for several weeks until stopped by police in Melbourne. Dressed in civilian clothes and in possession of a bicycle, Speck was recognised from a photograph by police in Kew. He initially denied he was an internee - but under further questioning admitted to being Oskar Speck. Police described him as 'a prisoner of ingenuity' and handed him back to military authorities. His punishment was 28 days in solitary confinement and a transfer to Loveday, South Australia, where he remained for the rest of the war. While interned at Loveday Speck revealed his political views in a letter to the Swiss Consul in Melbourne, Mr J A Pietzcker: 'This camp is not suited for the internment of Germans who are loyal to the Reich as they have no means at all of expressing their patriotism eg. Patriotic celebrations etc. I therefore urgently request you approach the responsible authority in order to have me transferred into a German National Socialist Camp.' Was Speck a Nazi? This picture is at odds with the views of those who knew him

after his release from internment. An acquaintance later described him as a loner who was avoiding returning to Germany as the Reich wanted to exploit his achievements as an example of German heroism, during their Russian campaign. In 1938 Speck's adventure had been serialised in a Berlin newspaper, casting him in the role of courageous hero. Photographs show a swastika pennant prominently displayed on the bow of his kayak. An Australian life Four days after his release from Loveday Internment camp, Speck was in Lightning Ridge, NSW, mining opal. He settled into postwar Australia and established a successful opal cutting business. He built his own home on the side of a hill at Killcare Heights on the NSW Central coast and retired there in the 1970s. For 30 years Speck's companion Nancy Steele commuted from Sydney to Killcare each weekend to see him. She lived with him during the last two years of his life. Speck died in 1995 after a long illness. Although Speck's achievements were well reported in Europe, few in Australia outside canoeing groups knew his story. Speck's double-ended paddle was presented to rower Carl Toovey as a jubilee trophy for winning the Cruising Canoe Club's Nepean 100 mile marathon in 1951 and 1952. This was the first marathon paddling event to be held in Australia. Toovey and Speck became friends and paddled together around Pittwater and Sydney Harbour. Through a bequest from Nancy Steele's estate, the Australian National Maritime Museum has become the custodian of a selection of Speck's personal effects. These include photographs and 16-mm film, letters and documents, and passports filled with exotic stamps from faraway places. The conservation of this collection, including copying of the fragile film, has been sponsored by the Salvation Army which was a beneficiary of the Nancy Steele Estate. This material is the key to piecing together his story and tapping into memories of Speck. Existing sources have raised questions and challenged assumptions about this elusive man. One newspaper story about him was headed 'Seven years in a kayak made him Australian'. But Speck's is a complex story about life and fate, experience and identity, which cannot easily be summed up in a sentence. Certainly, the Oskar Speck story has attracted an extraordinary amount of media and public attention since it was unveiled at the opening of WATERMARKS adventure sport play in December 2001. Research into the Speck saga will continue here at the Museum, as there is still much to learn about Oskar Speck, his voyage, internment and life in Australia.