

Andreas Sperl, maker of captain's spoons at Pärnu (*Pernau*) from 1802 to 1841

By Jürgen Beyer

In a recent issue of this journal, Anne Graham published a short, but intriguing account of a so-called captain's spoon from Pärnu (this coastal town in present-day Estonia and nineteenth-century Livonia was earlier internationally better known under its German name *Pernau*). The spoon is inscribed "Jacob Jacke & Co. Pernau 1839" and "RJB". It carries the Pärnu assay mark and the mark "A.S". Graham assumes that "A.S" stands for the silversmith who made the spoon and "RJB" for the captain who received it as a gift from the firm Jacob Jacke & Co. at Pärnu. Furthermore she expresses her hopes that one day it will be possible to identify the persons behind the initials.¹

The identification of RJB appears to be feasible. The archives of the trading firm Jacob Jacke & Co. are preserved fairly completely at the Estonian Historical Archives at Tartu (German: *Dorpat*), comprising over 5600 records from the years 1734 to 1940. In many long rows of account books one might find the expenditure for this spoon and for many similar spoons together with mention of RJB in conjunction with some business deal.

As this appeared to be a rather time-consuming task, I rather concentrated on identifying "A.S", and here I found an appropriate candidate right away. The Pärnu citizens' register lists all men who obtained the legal status of citizen, while the editor of this source has supplied the data with copious biographical notes. Only one person in this register could have produced a silver spoon with the mark "A.S" in the year 1839, namely Andreas Sperl.² He arrived at Pärnu from Turku (Swedish: *Åbo*) in Finland and was made a Pärnu citizen on 14 March 1802. Judging from his name, Sperl certainly was no Finn, and possibly not even of Swedish extraction. The surname rather suggests South German or Austrian origin. On becoming a Pärnu citizen, Sperl is described as a gold and silver worker. Shortly later, on 3 April 1802, he married Beata Sophia Tiedemann, the widow of the St

¹ Anne Graham, 'A captain's spoon from Pernau, Estonia?,' *The Finial* 20:4 (2010), 12f.

² H[einrich] Laakmann, *Das Bürgerbuch von Pernau*, 2 vols. (Tartu, 1936-39), no. 1161.

Petersburg engraver August Hopfert. Sperl died on 19 January 1841, 71 years old, soon to be followed by his wife who died on 22 February 1841, 72 years and six months old. While still at Turku, he apparently did not work independently yet since he is not mentioned among the masters of that town in a reference work on gold- and silversmiths in Finland.³

The data for Sperl, but not for his wife, are also given in a reference book on silver from the Baltic provinces. This work, however, claims – without any reference – that Sperl was a native of Austria.⁴ That is certainly possible judging from his name, but on obtaining citizenship at Pärnu he was definitely registered as coming from Turku. The reference work furthermore proceeds to publish two different versions each of Sperl's mark (made up of the letters A and S – one "A·S", the other "AS") and of the Pärnu assay mark occurring on his works. About the same information can be found in a book on silver from present-day Estonia, together with a more complete list of Sperl's works.⁵

Sperl worked at Pärnu until about 1811 when he moved to the countryside some ten miles north of Pärnu, where he ran the large dairy farm (*Hoflage*) Parisselja (German: *Parris*) attached to the manor Halinga (German: *Hallick*). He continued, however, to work there part-time as a gold- and silversmith, at least until 1819 when there was some dispute about his entitlement to be a member of the Pärnu guild despite his absence. At about the same time, a former servant on the farm sued Sperl, claiming not to have received his full salary.⁶

Later, however, Sperl seems to have moved back to Pärnu for good, since the inventory after the couple's death does not mention any items located outside the town.⁷ The records containing the inventory make it clear that Sperl left no heirs. At times Sperl is called a gold and silver worker, at others a master goldsmith. This variations seems to derive from changes in

³ Tyra Borg, *Guld- och silversmeder i Finland. Deras stämplor och arbeten 1373-1873* (Helsinki, 1935).

⁴ Annelore Leistikow, *Baltisches Silber* (Lüneburg, 1996), p. 277.

⁵ Kaalu Kirme, *Eesti hõbe. 800 aastat hõbe- ja kullasepakunsti Eestis* (Tallinn, 2000), pp. 175f., 198, 246, 270.

⁶ Tartu, Estonian Historical Archives (EHA): 1000-1-3450; EHA: 951-2-5217. On the manor and the farm, cf. Hans Feldmann & Heinz von zur Mühlen (eds.), *Baltisches historisches Ortslexikon*, vol. 1: Estland (einschließlich Nordlivland), by Gertrud Westermann (Cologne & Vienna, 1985), pp. 98, 433.

⁷ EHA: 1000-1-7495.

the Pärnu guild structure and in Sperl's form of membership. The details of Sperl's life could be described more fully with the help of archival records, but the aim of this article was to identify "A.S", not to give a biography of him.

Sperl obviously produced other items than just the 1839 spoon. It has been possible to find references to a name plate (1802),⁸ a beaker (1805)⁹ and further captain's spoons (1826,¹⁰ 1828¹¹ and 1835¹²). Of undated works there are a basket for sweets¹³ as well as pairs of salt bowls,¹⁴ of flambeaux¹⁵ and of table forks.¹⁶ Sperl probably also made a chalice.¹⁷ He does not, however, seem to have produced peasant brooches as did several other silversmiths in the area.¹⁸ Sperl not only produced captain's spoons for Jacob Jacke & Co. but also for the competing Pärnu firms Hans Diedrich Schmidt and Heinz Harder & Co.

Countless silver spoons bearing the names of trading firms or ship-brokers from harbour towns between Szczecin (German: *Stettin*) and St Petersburg are preserved from the period c. 1770 to 1900. The majority of these spoons dates from the first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁹ According to

⁸ Kirme, *Eesti hõbe* (as in n. 5), p. 175, 246.

⁹ Kirme, *Eesti hõbe* (as in n. 5), pp. 175, 246.

¹⁰ Leistikow, *Baltisches Silber* (as in n. 4), pp. 224 (ill.).

¹¹ A. Westers, 'Oostzeelepels in de verzameling von het Kapiteinshuis Pekela,' *Kapiteinshuis Pekela/Stichting Westers. Jaarverslag 2004*, 8-16, here 14, no. 40 (ill.).

¹² Westers, 'Oostzeelepels' (as in n. 11), 14, no. 41 (ill.). Possibly some of the five captain's spoons from Pärnu (1828 to 1837) listed in Henning Henningsen, 'Königsberg- og Rigaskeer. Et kapitel af kaptajns-gavernes historie,' *Aust-Agder-Arv 1965/66*, 64-76, here 73, were also made by Sperl as well as a number of the 38 Pärnu spoons registered on the Danish island of Ærø (Kaj Johansen, 'Registrering af skipperskeer,' *Marstal Søfartsmuseum 1992*, [6]-[11], here [9], not mentioning the dates).

¹³ Kirme, *Eesti hõbe* (as in n. 5), p. 175, 246.

¹⁴ Leistikow, *Baltisches Silber* (as in n. 4), p. 179 (ill.).

¹⁵ Kirme, *Eesti hõbe* (as in n. 5), pp. 175, 176 (ill.), 246.

¹⁶ Walter Brown, 'Collecting Russian flatware. A few notes for beginners,' *The Finial* 19:2 (2008), 9-11, here 11 (ill.).

¹⁷ Kirme, *Eesti hõbe* (as in n. 5), pp. 198, 246. It is not quite clear whether Kirme describes the same chalice as the Estonian registry of antiquities (<http://register.muinas.ee/?menuID=monument&action=view&id=6160>) which adds that the chalice was donated as late as 1846. Kirme expresses some doubts as to Sperl's authorship.

¹⁸ Kaalu Kirme, *Eesti sõled* (Tallinn, 2000).

¹⁹ Some of the more substantial publications on this subject are: H[enning] H[enningsen], 'Kaptajns-gaver,' *Årbog. Udgivet af Selskabet „Handels- og Søfartsmuseets Venner“ 1964*, 132-138; Henningsen, 'Königsberg- og Rigaskeer'

Ulf Hamran, each firm used a special design for its spoons which remained unchanged for longer periods even if another silversmith started to produce them.²⁰ In the case Hamran refers to, the first silversmith had ended his career when the next one took over.²¹ However, Sperl's spoons of 1826, 1828 and 1839 all used the same design, even though the first and the third were produced for Jacob Jacke & Co., while the second was made for Hans Diedrich Schmidt. The longevity of the designs may cause some confusion in dating captain's spoons.

Scholars have presented competing explanations as to the reasons for giving such spoons – either one spoon or several spoons at the same time. These explanations rely on much later oral traditions from families with a shipping background. (1) Every captain received a glass of Madeira on arrival and a silver spoon on leaving.²² (2) The spoons were exchanged as a token for having concluded a transport deal.²³ (3) They were given as a recognition to captains who had worked for the same firm several times.²⁴ (4) A spoon served as a reward for a quick journey.²⁵ (5) The captain received a spoon as a reward for the cargo being delivered in good shape.²⁶ (6) The first ship to arrive in the harbour in spring after the ice had melted received a spoon as a prize.²⁷ (7) The spoons constituted a payment in kind for the *primage* (also called *hat-money*) due to the shipmaster.²⁸

(as in n. 12) (mentioning also silver spoons handed out on the Norwegian coast, pp. 66f.); U[lf] H[amran], '... til at købe en ny hat for,' *Aust-Agder-Arv* 1965/66, 77-81; Chr[istian] Waagepetersen & Henning Henningsen, 'Skipperskeer,' *Skalk* 1969:3, 11-14; Henrik Vensild, 'De sejlede østpå – og fik sølvskeer,' *Fra Bornholms Museum* 1989/90, 67-76; Johansen, 'Registrering' (as in n. 12); Leistikow, *Baltisches Silber* (as in n. 4), p. 199; Westers, 'Oostzeelepels' (as in n. 11). Unfortunately, I had no access to [Hendrik A[ndries] Hachmer,] *Met de groeten uit Riga. Herinneringen aan de Oostzeevaart*, 2nd ed. (Assen, 2007).

²⁰ Hamran, '... til at købe en ny hat for' (as in n. 19), 81.

²¹ Leistikow, *Baltisches Silber* (as in n. 4), pp. 318, 333.

²² Westers, 'Oostzeelepels' (as in n. 11), 8.

²³ Westers, 'Oostzeelepels' (as in n. 11), 8.

²⁴ Johansen, 'Registrering' (as in n. 12), [10].

²⁵ Henningsen, 'Königsberg- og Rigaskeer' (as in n. 12), 66; Vensild, 'De sejlede østpå' (as in n. 19), 74.

²⁶ Henningsen, 'Königsberg- og Rigaskeer' (as in n. 12), 66; Vensild, 'De sejlede østpå' (as in n. 19), 74.

²⁷ Henningsen, 'Königsberg- og Rigaskeer' (as in n. 12), 66; Vensild, 'De sejlede østpå' (as in n. 19), 68. Given the sheer number of spoons preserved, this cannot have been the only reason for giving spoons. There are, for

Another explanation, namely as a bribe,²⁹ is much less likely. If a firm wanted to bribe someone, it would have been advisable to use cash rather than a silver spoon with the firm's name on it. A more appropriate term would be a *promotional gift*. We all have received such promotional gifts, at least in their simplest form as ballpoint pens inscribed with the names of companies or institutions. Captain's spoons are among the earliest known promotional gifts. Captains not only received spoons as gifts. They could also be presented with tin boxes for ship's papers, punch bowls, glasses, coffee sets etc. – often inscribed with the trading firm's or the ship-broker's name.³⁰

The new owner's name or initials were possibly first added to the spoon in the captain's home-town.³¹ Captain's spoons were later often re-used as gifts, for instance on the occasion of baptisms, confirmations or weddings. Some of the inscriptions – and maybe also "RJB" on Anne Graham's spoon – thus date from such later occasions.³² Since many of the spoons preserved today show traces of wear and tear, their function was not restricted to the exchange of gifts. They were in daily use.

Future research in the archives might not only, as stated above, provide an explanation for the initials RJB, it might also tell whether the firm Jacob Jacke & Co. held a stock of spoons or whether the spoons were made from scratch in each individual case. The records might reveal as well whether we here are, indeed, dealing with captain's spoons – after all, there is some

instance, 17 spoons of the firm Ernst Castell at Königsberg, covering the years 1862 to 1870, known from the island of Ærø alone (Johansen, 'Registrering' (as in n. 12), [9]).

²⁸ Hamran, '... til at købe en ny hat for' (as in n. 19), 77; Anja Salminen, 'Kapteeninlusikka,' *Kapsäkki. Pohjanmaan Museon tiedotuslehti* 2010:1, 36f.

²⁹ Henningsen, 'Kaptajngaver,' (as in n. 19), 132; Henningsen, 'Königsberg- og Rigaskeer' (as in n. 12), 66; Tove Kjærboe, 'Ærøsk sølv,' *Fynske årbøger* 1977, 101-120, here 102; Walter Brown, ['Feedback,'] *The Finial* 20:6 (2010), 10.

³⁰ Henningsen, 'Kaptajngaver,' (as in n. 19); Henningsen, 'Königsberg- og Rigaskeer' (as in n. 12), 64-66, 68; Dokumentenbussen in de verzameling von het Kapiteinshuis Pekela, *Kapiteinshuis Pekela/Stichting Westers. Jaarverslag* 2004, 6-8.

³¹ Henningsen, 'Königsberg- og Rigaskeer' (as in n. 12), 69.

³² Henningsen, 'Kaptajngaver,' (as in n. 19), 133; Johansen, 'Registrering' (as in n. 12), [10]; Henrik Vensild, 'Nyt fra Bornholms Museum 1994-1995,' *Fra Bornholms Museum* 1994/95, 3-14, here 5f. Some examples for this practice can also be found on the webpage of the Frisian Museum of Shipping at Sneek: <http://www.friesscheepvaartmuseum.nl/nl/zoeken-in-de-collectie> (search for "cargadoorslepel").

evidence for spoons being given to pilots and officers.³³ Possibly we could learn from the archives whether the new owner's name or initials were engraved already at Pärnu or whether the captain had done this back home. The Estonian Historical Archives also hold the large archives of two other spoon-issuing trading firms, Hans Diedrich Schmidt at Pärnu and Thomas Clayhills & Sohn at Tallinn (German: *Reval*). With some luck the trading firms' archives might allow to reconstruct the actual context in which captain's spoons were given. It will probably also be possible to tell whether the trading firms, as has been suggested,³⁴ always relied on the same silversmiths to produce their spoons. So far, scholars have only been able to work with assumptions, based on the surviving spoons and on family traditions through two or more generations.

³³ Kaj Johansen, 'Regist[r]ering af skipperskeer fortsætter,' *Marstal Søfartsmuseum* 1993, 23.

³⁴ Hamran, '... til at købe en ny hat for' (as in n. 19), 80f.