

The Danube Swabians: A Post-War Extermination

Kristina Joy Hubbard

Faculty Sponsor: Annette White-Parks, English Department

ABSTRACT

The objective of this undergraduate research project was to examine a culture of my ancestry, the Danube Swabians, and the genocidal aspect of their past. With the grant money I was awarded, I was able not only to acquire books and interviews, but I also had the opportunity to explore the culture first-hand by visiting Austria. As a result of this research, I hope to educate others on this atrocity that claimed two million lives after the end of the Second World War. The stories that I have gathered and uncovered from Yugoslavian survivors will help reclaim their experiences, so that they will not be forgotten, and so that history may not repeat itself.

INTRODUCTION

During the eighteenth century, Germans were encouraged to emigrate to the lands along the Danube River in countries that we now know as Yugoslavia, Romania, and Hungary. The enticement to cultivate these unsettled landscapes was a way for the Hapsburg monarchy of Austria to develop farmland, spread the Roman Catholic religion in Eastern Europe, and strengthen their defense against invasive countries. The city of Ulm, Germany (the area of Swabia) became the main departure point for the many people setting off to make a new start, most of whom were peasants of meager wealth. It was here that people traveled down the Danube River until they reached Vienna, Austria, where they had to stop to receive their land grants. Covered wagons were also a source of transportation, and like the boats, they followed the path of the Danube. The migration existed under the rule of Empress Maria Theresia of Austria from 1744 to 1772. This great colonization period was called “der Grosse Schwabenzug” or the “Great Swabian Trek.” They were peaceful pioneers, settling only on land that was given to them.

All of these settlers spoke different dialects, yet as a whole they were grouped together under the name given by the Hungarians as “Swabians.” To this day the title of “Donauschwaben” (Danube Swabians) is still used in reference to the Danube settlers of German descent. The name “Swabian” came from the Swabia area (Ulm, Germany) where they departed from (Walter). Perhaps it is more appropriate to refer to these people as “Danube Germans,” for although Ulm, Swabia was the port in Germany from which they left, not all of the German pioneers that migrated were from that one area in Germany (Koehler).

The Danube Swabians turned what was once useless farmland into the “bread basket” of Europe. Their traditional farming practices, such as crop rotation, helped their new homelands to economically and socially flourish. While they maintained their old dialects and traditions, they also learned the languages of their new countries so that they would live harmoniously with the natives. What developed for the settlers in the Danube plains was an entirely new culture, for as the century turned over, new generations found themselves refer-

ring to their ethnicity as not just Danube Swabian, but Yugoslavian, Romanian, and Hungarian. The middle of the twentieth century would soon redefine them all, for these generations that existed now in the Plains were forced to see themselves, perhaps for the first time, as “Germans.” They would soon become scapegoats for having an ancestry that dated back 200 years to a country that a lot of them had never even seen. (Schmidt)

It was after the fall of Hitler that the Danube Swabians in Yugoslavia became victims of the country’s communist leader, Tito, and his regime. All ethnic Germans, including the Danube Swabians, were stripped of their citizenship and property rights and were told to leave the country with little and sometimes no warning. These Danube Swabians who successfully escaped the mass liquidation by leaving their towns before the Red Army and Tito’s Partisans invaded, faced a strenuous trek to either Germany or Austria in harsh winter conditions. Those who did not heed the warnings faced death by means of either torture or extermination camps.

The stories that I have gathered from survivors illustrate details about the journeys from Yugoslavia to Germany and Austria, as well as details about their acclimatisation to a new country. The displaced persons never returned to their family homesteads, many properties of which had been in families for centuries.

METHOD

I discovered that, as in my life, I had to turn not to someone but something for direction with my research project. It came in the form of stacked paper, holes, a spiral, a cover, and unwritten space: a journal. That is where my researching journey began, and through keeping a journal for my research I was able to stay organized both physically and mentally. When I began to feel discouraged with the quantity and content of my research, I found comfort in turning the cover of my journal over to find pages and pages of addresses, notes, and most importantly, personal reflections on everything and everyone I had become involved with. As my regular journal serves as the therapy and documentation of my daily life, creative poems and drawings serve as my release from the technical aspect of my research project.

With the aid of my undergraduate research grant, I was able to experience this culture first-hand by traveling to Austria to interview relatives and their friends. I acquired fascinating stories from survivors who experienced expulsion from their native country of Yugoslavia and was able to immerse myself in the emotions involved with oral tradition. In addition to the visitations made in Austria, I traveled to the Donauschwaebisches Zentralmuseum (a Danube Swabian museum) in Ulm, Germany. Prior to my trip to Europe, I acquired many contacts and books through letters and e-mails. I also interviewed a woman in Milwaukee, Wisconsin who has spent a great deal of her life researching the Danube Swabian culture.

RESULTS

I have unearthed a part of history that was wrongly attempted to be erased. I have documented answers to questions that only survivors of this atrocity could offer, and I have experienced the difficulty of asking questions that evoke emotions linked to memories long suppressed. The numbers and statistics will be visible to those who seek them in the years to come, but the stories will soon move from oral tradition to ears, to paper, and sadly in most instances, to dust.

Resulting from my year of research are the beginning stages of a publishable manuscript that intertwines historic documentation of events that followed the fall of Hitler at the end of World War II, with the stories of my family survivors.

DISCUSSION

I have spent eight years studying German language, history, and literature and not once did I hear about this post-World War II event. While I was educated a considerable amount on the Holocaust, never was the mass liquidation of ethnic Germans exposed to me. Responsible may be the best way to put how I presently feel in regard to all of the research I have accomplished this past year. Never could I have ever imagined that my own ancestors were a part of an ethnic cleansing that mirrored the harshness of the actions of Hitler and his Nazis. This history that has been covered up for four decades is the only way that future generations will know and understand where they came from. Our young generations lack a connection with their cultures, and the high-speed forward motion of our “progressive” society is making it even harder for people to look back. By not exploring our roots and not understanding our past, history, including atrocities like that involving the Danube Swabians, will have a better chance of repeating itself. By educating people, especially the young, we can prevent future atrocities by recognizing their beginnings before we are punished by their ends.

LIMITATIONS

What I have found to be both difficult and rewarding with this research is the dependency on other people as resources. I never knew if anyone would respond to my letters or e-mails, if names that I received would belong to people willing to speak about their experiences, or if anyone I contacted would even be able to offer aid that was relevant to my research. There was a confidence in people that I had not met, and there was also a confidence in compiling a product as a result of this research as a whole. Another limitation with my research was finding people who were willing to unearth the painful memories. It was not only revisiting past memories that some people feared when finding a reason not to share their experiences. One man feared other people more than anything. I had wanted to interview this particular man, yet he was afraid that people still angry and seeking vengeance on certain ethnic Germans might be after him—over fifty years later.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported financially by a grant awarded to me by the UW-L Undergraduate Research Committee. I wish to thank academic mentor and friend, Annette White-Parks, for her constant encouragement that made me pursue this project, and for her advice and faith that gave me strength. I would like to thank Eve Koehler for her gift of books, articles, photographs, and personal expertise. I must thank my mother, Juliana Hubbard, for not only her assistance, but for her enthusiasm and pride that she displayed towards my project from beginning to end. This project was also made possible by means of support given to me by family members residing in the beautiful country of Austria, some of whom are proud Danube Swabian survivors. And lastly, I must thank the strongest woman in my life whose many stories from the “old country” sparked my interest in this aspect of my ancestry, and someone I hold most dear in my heart, Frances Abt, my grandmother.

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