

# Memoires of Konrad Hassler

## An Orphan in Yugoslavia

By Konrad Hassler

September 1944, it was a very confusing time. The German troops were in retreat and encouraged everyone to flee from the Russian Red Army as rumors spread they were furious revenge seeking troops and certainly it would effect the population in the Vojvodina of German ancestry although they have lived in peace with their Serbian and Hungarian neighbors for more than 250 years.

Several years after WWI, during the world wide depression and shortly after, my father Matthias found it necessary, in order to provide for his family, to seek work in Munich, Germany. But when my younger brother Matthias became ill, my father asked my mother Veronika to come to Munich as well for treatments. This left me in care of my grandmother Susanna Spiegl and Great Grandmother Franziska Gottfried on my mother's side.

As our people in Batsch-Brestowatz were encouraged to flee under the protection of the German army, they also saw to draft our men left in town into the army amongst them my grandfather, who lost his life only months later by the oncoming Red Army.

The turmoil in the village continued when the Red Army reached our town. One cannot imagine the havoc they created, not to speak of when the Tito Partisans

arrived only weeks later. Our peaceful village never would be the same. Although the war was over in the Vojvodina by October of 1944, our demise would just begin.

It was on March 16<sup>th</sup> of 1945 when a never ending convoy of people came along Main Street of our village all afternoon going into nightfall and came to rest on the street near the church. I learned from my grandmother these people were expelled from their home in Batschsentivan.

The next morning partisans also entered our house and asked us to leave; since my grandmother was unable to walk we were loaded on a wagon and driven behind the convoy to Filipowa. In Filipowa we stayed for two weeks and had to leave the home we stayed and marched to the Hutweide where we stayed overnight in the open and slept on the grass of the meadow. The following day we were loaded into box cars amongst us my Grandmother, Great Grandmother and my Uncle Gabriel Spiegl. We arrived the following day together in Gakowa on April 1<sup>st</sup> 1945.

Our lives took a turn for the worst, when only two weeks after our arrival there my Great-grandmother died about May 15<sup>th</sup> 1945. A year later in 1946 my Grandmother passed away and now I was with my Uncle Gabriel Spiegl.

My Uncle made a decision to escape from Gakowa across the border to Hungary with me together with a group of people I did not know. As we approached the border and were about to cross, we were spotted by Partisan border guards. Suddenly everybody's life was in the hands of the Partisans with the

exception of my uncle, who managed to run across the border to Hungary, while I was amongst complete strangers now.

Was my uncle searching for me afterwards? I really know do not know. We were now taken to a camp. Unfortunately I cannot tell where it was located, but think it must have been close to Hungarian border, since it did not take us long to arrive in the camp.

Once here we were lined up against a wall while the guards went inside a building next to the wall, most likely to get instructions as to what to do with us. Scared and bewildered I decided to run away. In a desperate effort to run away I was able to jump over the wall and, although I became under rifle fire, was only slightly nicked by a bullet. As quick as I could I allowed myself to fall on the ground and stay still as if I was dead. The guard may have thought they killed me and never bothered to check if this was the case. What happened to the other people I do not know; were they executed or taken to Kruschiwl or Gakowa?

I stayed hidden for a couple of days, but became hungry and sneaked back to the Partisans complex. I looked for something to eat by going through their garbage cans. This I did for several days and then moved on and while I was walking down the road I heard a bus coming in the distance. When it slowed down to cross a bridge I hopped on the ladder on the back of the bus and hung on. When the bus stopped I left and wandered around the countryside. My only concern was now to find food to stay alive. Now, being separated and away from everyone as well as possible dangers and dependent on myself, I wandered around aimlessly.

On the way came a Partisan taking a woman and child somewhere; they asked me to come with them and I did fear the worst again. But apparently they must have taken me in. What transpired next is quite hazy; I would have to say completely blank. How can I explain a period of my life during which I do not have any recollection of what was happening to me.

Did I contract an illness during the time I had to sleep under the sky without adequate food or shelter? If you contract typhus you begin to hallucinate and your mind may not recollect anything that transpired during this time period. Was that what happened to me? Who took care of me during this time?

What I remember next: I found myself in an orphanage in Knjazevac near the Bulgarian border during the middle of the year of 1946. While I was there it seemed to be very nice, considering. Most importantly now was that I was looked after, had good food, and a bunk bed to sleep on. I had to go to school using the Serbian language till 1949.

Once while I was taking a walk outside of the orphanage I was approached by a couple (man and woman) and later I learned it was my parents who had sent people to find me and to take me to Germany. However, I did not know who they were, but was asked to go with them. But people from the orphanage saw me and they stopped me from going with them. I knew that I was not permitted to leave the grounds of the orphanage. I gave them an excuse and continued to stay there for another year.

The World Church Conference in 1950, whose priority issues were refugees whose family members were separated, took place in Salzburg, Austria. Prof. A. K.

Gauss presented a document entitled “Children in the Shadow” at the conference. He addressed the problems of thousands of children orphaned and left to suffer in Yugoslavia without parents, grandparents or caring relatives. It was the first time the world took note of the problem and with the cooperation and the help of the International Red Cross, thousands of children were allowed to leave Yugoslavia to be reunited with their families in Austria, Germany, USA and other countries.

During early spring of 1950 the Red Cross visited orphanages in Yugoslavia to look for children still alive whose parents were in Germany or Austria so they could be reunited with their parents. I was one of these children who were found through this effort. I would be placed on the train headed to Germany with others. There I was reunited with my parents in Munich.

After separation from my family for more than 5 years, I still did recognize my parents. Now I learned that I had another brother. I had to tell them about my survival, the death of my Great-grandmother, Grandmother and our attempted escape to Hungary with my Uncle. I could no longer be allowed to go to school in Munich, since I was 15 years old now and had to go to work with my father as upholsterer.

In the meantime my parents had applied for emigration to Canada and only six months after my arrival in Munich on September 22<sup>nd</sup> 1950 we boarded the Beaverbrae from Bremen to Toronto, Canada. On this trip we encountered a storm which made our trip someone unpleasant, but looked forward to begin a new life in Toronto, Canada. After my arrival I was somewhat surprised that I did have to go to High School. This presented difficulties for me as I could not speak English and was forced to drop out. In order for us to learn the language all of us had to take

night courses in English together. It was kind of fun to compete against each other to see who would learn to speak quicker.

It did not take long for us to speak enough to be able to secure work and an education to establish a wonderful life in Canada, the free world.