

# Historical Accounts

## Our lost Donauschwaben Children

### The most tragic Chapter of our Danube Swabian Tragedy

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Our Danube Swabian ancestors lived for centuries in ethnic German communities surrounded by other nations, like islands in a sea. They were far away from their mother country but firmly kept their identity in custom and language and stayed untouched for centuries by political events of the place of their original roots. For them their language was their identity.

All that changed as the hurricane winds of WWII swept over them, and in a matter of days they lost everything that they had achieved over generations. When they had to flee the place of their birth where their parents and grandparents and the grandparents of grandparents were born, they left much poorer than when they arrived there 250 years earlier. So once again they stood there with nothing, once again they had to start from scratch.

Those who managed to flee before the Red Army invaded the Danube Swabian ancestry lands were the lucky ones. In Austria and the ravaged Germany they were not met with open arms, and no one believed their stories of what wealth they had left behind.

But from all the hardships and genocide that befall us Danube Swabians, the most cruel and most shocking tragedy is the fate of our lost children in communist Yugoslavia.

Today we know that between 40,000 to 45,000<sup>(1)</sup> Donauschwaben children below the age of 14 were sent into Tito's starvation camps and at least 6,000 (13%) starved to death. The torture of children was programmed together with the internment of all ethnic German civilians. Particularly cruel was the brutal taking of children from their mothers as almost all young women were shipped as work slaves to Russia.<sup>2</sup>

It is also documented that over 20,000 children were taken from those camps and sent to orphanages spread all over Yugoslavia. Siblings were separated, most children received Slavic names and they were sent to areas far away from their ancestral homes in order to be raised with a new ideology in a new language in order to make out of them true patriots of the Tito's state. This re-nationalization process runs against the human rights and personal dignity as per the UN declaration in 1948.

That was 65 years ago and there is nothing that we can change now. But it is our duty not to forget them. Those were our people!

As winds of war took their turn, our Donauschwaben were advised by wiser folk to leave while they could and in Slavonia and Syrmien, where the Danube Swabian villages were closer to war exposure, most of the inhabitants left in long columns going West, but the Banaters who were familiar with various natural disaster like hunger, famine, loss of harvest, floods and upheavals of various kinds decided to stay, as they also knew that one just had to have patience and better times would come again. Of course one assumed that there would be political changes after the war was finally over, but for centuries now they successfully lived with the motto *loyalty to ethnicity and loyalty to the state* and once again they would adjust.

As the Soviets occupied the Pannonian Plains, where more than 1/2 million ethnic Germans lived, they turned over the military administration to the partisans. Those partisans were not part of a disciplined army, but a roughshod group of thugs from Bosnian and Serbian mountains, who considered Danube Swabian assets their rightful war booty and handled as such.

Were those partisans afraid of resistance? Of course not! All the men were on the Front, only women, children and old men were left at home and had no means of offering any resistance.

Tito's administration in Belgrade decreed a law on 21<sup>st</sup> of November 1944, that

1. All ethnic Germans living in Yugoslavia as of that day automatically lost their citizenships and citizenship rights.
2. All the assets of persons of German ethnicity, liquid and real estate are automatically confiscated by the state as of that day.

With that law those 200,000 of Danube Swabians, who still resided in Yugoslavia as of that day, became **outlaws**. Both Moscow and Belgrade wanted to get rid of the ethnic Germans once and for all.<sup>131</sup>

The leaders of the Soviet Army insisted to be repaid by the Yugoslavian government for the costs it took to occupy Yugoslavia, or in their words to 'free' Yugoslavia. Belgrade was bankrupt and had no means of doing so. Yet the Soviets insisted. If Belgrade could not pay in gold, they could pay in workers, which were desperately needed in the war torn Soviet Union.

Paying with workers? Now that was easy! There were all those Donauschwaben outlaws one could do with what one wanted. So they talked of work reparations (Arbeitsverpflichtungen) and went into Danube Swabian villages to collect the workers. In Banat's town of Apatin alone, 2,400 women were deported to the Soviet Union and in all of Banat not counting the women of the other Danube Swabian areas, Batschka, Slavonia, Sirmien, Bosnia, more than 40,000 women were taken. <A>

At Christmas 1944 all men from 18-45 and all women from 18 - 30, later up to the age of 35 were deported. Seized from their homes and sent by train in unheated cattle cars up to 17 days through Russian winter to the mines in **Kriwoi Rog and Stalino**. And in most cases their children had to be left behind by themselves.

What nightmares did those mothers go through, worrying about their children left all alone? What nightmares must they have had while toiling deep down in the mines and had no means of getting in contact with home? Three, and in many cases five long years, if they ever left Russia at all. Only one out of three of those women made it home.

Home? There was no home. They were abandoned in East Germany, broken down, sick and at the end of their despair. For them a new Leidensweg began: the search for the husband, children, and relatives.

For the children, though, who had to be left behind the separation from the mother must have been an unspeakable horror. That wound would not have healed for the rest of their lives.

So the children stayed behind. Life for the children improved somewhat, where there were older siblings who could look after the little ones, or the grandparents close by to help overcome this inhumane ordeal. In homes where the children were left completely by themselves, the kindness of the neighbours touchingly smoothed the pain. Depended on each other for support the Donauschwaben had developed a thriving community spirit in those 2 centuries of living in the midst of other nations.

Alas, now the partisans were the masters, and no one was safe from their atrocities. The Partisans collected all those Danube Swabians who were still there, those children, and the old people and put them in the concentration camps. Those who could work ended up in the slave labour camps and the others in Tito's most infamous starvation camps. Like Rudolfsgand and Gakovo starvation camps.

The A.V.N.O.J. - *Antifasisticko Vece Narodnog Oslobođenja Jugoslavije* - planned that in three years time; by 1947 there would be not one ethnic German left in all of Yugoslavia.<sup>5</sup>

The number statistics prove that by 1948 when most of the starvation camps were closed of the 200,000 Donauschwaben imprisoned in them there were only a few ten thousands people still alive.

The *white death* as the hunger was called, was a simple way of Tito's administration to deal with the Danube Swabians. Each day a living room size hole was dug out where the dead were thrown in. The Belgrade's system functioned devilishly perfectly. The smallest children were the first ones to die.

Father Wendelin Gruber of Filipowa/Batschka spent some time in the Gakowa death camp as prisoner. He visited the children's homes, which were set up in the larger farmhouses within the camp. 20-30 children in each room were lying around on straw and scantily covered. Only skin and bones, sick and with infected wounds. Nobody cared for them.<sup>6</sup>

Survivors talked about an old man in Filipowa, a grandfather, who collected all of his grandchildren from the homes of his sons who were drafted and from the homes of his daughters who were deported. There were 28 of them that ended up in the starvation camps.

Another old man described the abandoned children's situation as such: "The children sat around, cried, and if someone threw them a watermelon peel to eat, they would be happy for the rest of the day."

By 1947 the rumor about those starvation camps reached America and Tito's administration finally and grudgingly was forced to do something about the camp's children. They looked for a 'humane' way of dealing with the kids and decided it would be smarter to raise them in their own communist ideology. The children of 3 years and younger would not remember their names, or parents or where they came from, so they were sent to the orphanages where they were trained to have an aversion for all things German. Perhaps they might even train the boys to be Tito's future *Janitscharen*, as the Turks did with the Serbian male population centuries before.

One of those children, **Katharina Sesko, nee Mandel of Sekitsch**<sup>71</sup> wrote about it in her memoir:

*"It was in the summer time that a horse-cart drove through the Gakovo camp and collected all the children, who no longer had any relatives with them. We were brought to a house in Gakovo, where already other children were waiting. A little bit later all of us were taken away. We were brought to **Sta.ro. Kanjisch**, where already some 350-400 children from diverse camps were assembled.*

*The first slice of bread and milk after such a long time we received in Kanjisch. Seeing the bread our eyes were popping out. All of us children were grossly malnourished and starving and quite a few of us were ill. Now we received medical care and also had enough to eat.*

*After we recuperated we were spread on different orphanages together with Serbian children, just a few ethnic Germans in each orphanage, so we would learn the Serbian language. I was in the orphanage in Sombor."*

In an open letter the *Salzburger Nachrichten* (Salzburg's News) on January 1950 reported about the tragedy of the 40,000 Danube Swabian children and their parents in Yugoslavia, but there was no reaction from **Eleanor Roosevelt** who was representing "human rights" at the UN at that time.<sup>81</sup>

Professor Adalbert Gauss from Batschka traced in 1950 more than 40 of those orphanages about which he wrote in *Kinder im Schatten* (Children in the Shadow). In his book he claimed that they were raised with the ideology that the state was their mother and father, to whom they owed absolute obedience.

Helga and Erika, two sisters from **Velika Greda** (Georgshausen) one was 4 and the other 2 years old when their grandmother Katarina Hirsch died in 1945 in Rudolfsgnad's starvation camp in whose care they were left, as well as their little cousin Petar Bayerle. Their father was

killed on the Front by that time and the mother was deported to the Soviet Union. They were taken to different orphanages one in Prilep and the other in Kumanovo, both in Macedonia, where they soon learned perfect Macedonian and did forget all the German they knew.

Helga remembers that first thing each morning they had to sing the national anthem and salute to the photographs of comrade Tito and comrade Stalin. One day there was only the photograph of comrade Tito with no explanation given. Both of them kept their German names though and Helga had a nickname 'macka' (pussy cat), as she was one of the youngest there. The word 'mom or mother' was never mentioned, as if such a word or person just did not exist. Helga remembers receiving a parcel from her uncle in Canada. She had no clue of the meaning of 'uncle', nor could she keep any of the parcel's contents.

The children slept 2-3 in one bed, and each morning they had to line up in the huge yard to wash their faces in the huge basin filled with cold water.

Frequently they were surprised by the dreaded call for a de-lousing session. They partnered-up and sat amongst the ruins in the huge yard and checked each other's head for lice. If lice or scalp sores were found their head was shaved and benzene poured over it.

There was no celebration of Birthdays or Christmas or Easter, etc. However, when some dignitary came to oversee the situation at the Orphanage they were assembled, standing in salute while singing Druze Tito. This is one time when they got a special treat, 'a slice of white bread' ...what a treat that was.'

**Johann Schetterer** from Schowe, the son of same named father and Elisabeth Heinz, nearing the end of war, came with his mother to Novi Sad's internment camp at the age of three. His family was known as Schetris which was the name that he was registered under. After his mother's death he was transported with other children in 1947 to the orphanages in Slovenia. In 1949 he arrived in the Slivnica orphanage with Adolf Hauer, another child from his village. It was quite a cruel childhood. The children's responsibility beside schoolwork was also to work on the fields and in the gardens. There were 12 cows and quite a few of pigs that the children had to take care of. Corporal punishment was a daily order, and for the slightest misbehavior, food was withheld for a day.

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By 1953 his village friend Adolf Hauer was reunited with his family in Germany, but because Johann's name was registered as Schetris (later spelled as Cetri) and he did not know any other

name, he stayed in different orphanages eventually finishing high school and learning the trade of car mechanic.

Johann was all of 21 years old when he finally discovered his real name by going to the Red Cross archives in Belgrade. There he was able to trace the address of his village and his orphanage friend Adolf Hauer in Germany. Adolf's older sister knew the real name of Schetris, and was also in contact with Johann's extended family members. As luck would have it, Johann received his father's address and was thrilled to be reunited with his dad in 1962. His father had been searching for his missing son Johann after being released from the French prisoner of war camp in 1950. To speed up the matter, Johann escaped illegally over the border and was reunited with his father in Austria.

Another orphan child traced was **Christian Heinz**, born on 24 March 1940 in Neu Schowe to Adam Heinz and Philip-pina Wolf. Philippina died in Jarek's starvation camp on 29<sup>th</sup> of December 1945 and her three sons Martin, Adam and Christian aged 16, 14, and 5 stayed in the camp. Christian at 5 was taken to an orphanage and the family to this day is still desperately searching for any traces of him. Adam and Martin were smuggled out of the camp and live in Germany.

The book of Professor Gauss' "Kinder im Schatten" publication in 1950, which included 53 eyewitness reports, initiated some movement in the rescue of the children. Under the pressure from most of the world, particularly the International Red Cross and other organizations, the Yugoslav government reluctantly established a 'repatriation delegation office' in Vienna, where thousands of requests for missing children poured in. They insisted that the original birth certificate would be provided, before they would even look at the papers.

One has to understand what kind of impossible fact that was. The parents were dragged from their homes with minutes of notice and stripped of everything they had on them. They stayed for years in the starvation camps or the Soviet Union slave labour mines or were on the front, before they managed to reach the freedom with only their lives.

Tito's government even insisted that those requests and documentation be written in Serbian, sometimes even in the Cyrillic writing. It was all deception and delaying tactics.

Yet it was hugely important to get in contact with those children, even if only in writing. They were separated for almost 10 years from their parents. Seldom were the letters as important as in those times and situations.

After some of the children finally found out where their mother was deported to, one 9 year old girl, who was at the time of abduction 3 years old, wrote to her mother:

*'My dear, good mother, when I think on that word when I said: "mother do not go away, and you had to go, it was an unbearable pain for you and me. '^9>*

Another heart wrenching story talks about a boy, hardly three years old: The father went missing in the war in 1941. The mother was deported to Russia in 1944 and he ended up with his grandparents in Gakovo's starvation camp, where he slept on straw between his grandparents. When he woke up one morning both of the grandparents were dead. This boy was sent later to one of the states orphanages in Krsko. His mother after her release from Ukraine- managed to trace him from where he wrote in Slavic:

*"Dear Mother! I was thrilled to receive your letter. I am so glad to know that there is one person in the world who loves me. I was with grandfather and grandmother in the camp but both of them died in the same night. Then I was all alone... '^10J*

Our Danube Swabian children were highly manipulated in those orphanages. Specifically the older children were made to believe that their parents purposely abandoned them. They made those children believe that their parents were hard-core fascist, while actually most of them were just farmers. In some cases when some of those children were reunited with their parents, those manipulated children spat in the parent's faces and refused to go with them.

Let's return briefly to the story of Helga and Erika, originally from **Velika Greda**, who we left in two orphanages in Macedonia. In the meantime their mother was released from Stalin's slave labour mine camp in 1947 and brought by train from Russia more dead than alive to East Germany. She managed to drag herself across the country and reach West Germany with the last of her strength virtually crawling across the border to freedom.

Eventually she found a housekeeping job in Bavaria, but because Bavaria was already overflowing with refugees they did not accept any families, so the mother found work on a farm in Wuerttemberg. First of all she got in contact with the Red Cross where she found out that her brother in Canada did initiate the search for the girls already.

Today we know that more than 5,000 named children were reunited with their families. 5,000 reunited and those 6,000 who starved to death of the 45,000 of Danube Swabian children. And the others?

If one travels today through Macedonia for instance, one will be surprised to find blue eyed and blond people surrounded by dark heads. Those blond people themselves must wonder about their origin. Did they ever receive their original birth certificates? Do they know their real names? In former Yugoslavia one still does not talk about those children, as if it never happened. Dr. Geiger in Zagreb is one of the brave souls who published a few articles on those lost Donauschwaben Children.<sup>11</sup> But we must do more.

As aforementioned, **Katharina Sesko, nee Mandel of Sekitsch** was placed in the Rudolfsgnad camp. She continued in her memoir: *"After the camp was closed my Oma received permission to return to Sekitsch. I could visit her during the holidays. My father returned from the concentration camp in 1949 and we stayed in Sekitsch until 1951. In the meantime my mother came from Russia's slave labour camp to Salzburg, Austria. She helped us to join her that year."*

Erika and Helga were reunited with their mother through the Red Cross. It took the uncle in Canada and their mother in Germany seven years to be reunited with the girls.

Helga described it this way:

During spring 1951 Erika and I were reunited in Kumanovo with the purpose of being transported to Germany to meet our mother. After the papers were processed in Belgrade we were put on a train. We were given a coat and a small suitcase. I don't know what the contents were in this little suitcase, and as we recall, it never occurred to us to check it out. There appeared to be a male escort with us but he did not speak with us or explain to us where we were going. We were frightened of the uniformed officer who approached us during a brief stop at some border crossing. Erika and I never spoke of what is ahead of us; we were 'strangers' to each other.

*On April 17, 1951 we arrived at the Refugee Centre in Kornwestheim, Germany where we were told that our mother would be picking us up. Neither Erika nor I were overjoyed, excited or anxious. There was only 'acceptance' and suspicion. When mom appeared we were non-emotional and had a feeling of detachment. She meant nothing to us! I believe that is because of all those years of not being allowed to question or show emotion. .... You did what you were told to do without questioning. There was apprehension about leaving the Orphanage...how could there not have been as, after all, we felt safe in the confinement of this enclosed camp."*

Erika remembers a specific incident:

The parents were on the podium, while the children waited for their names to be called. At last only Erika and Helga stood there holding hands, while on the podium were 2 women. One was extremely skinny and the other quite the opposite. Nine-year-old Erika prayed silently that the corpulent one would be the mother, as anyone so well fed must be surely from America.

It turned out that the mother was the skinny one and the other lady the farmer who helped their mother pick up the girls with her horse and buggy. While in the buggy, both girls received each a large pretzel, something that they have never seen or knew what to do with it. A lick tasted salty, so Helga whispered to Erika in Macedonian, the only language that she new *"lets throw it away, they want to poison us"*.

However, they soon discovered that their mom was a very loving, warm and caring person and learned to love and respect her tremendously.

For us Danube Swabians those young people still missing are lost forever. **They may be lost, but they will never be forgotten.**

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*1944 Refugee Convoy - Sketch by the author*



*1944 - Partisans  
Herwig Pimiskem Archives*



*Stefan Jager - 1944 Expulsion*



*Book Cover  
Bin Volk Ausgeloscht L. Rohrbacher*



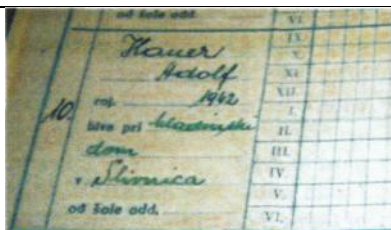
*Hirsch Family ca. 1941 - Helga Wilson Archives*



*Family Schetterer from Schowe, 1942  
Johann Schetterer Archives*



*Former Slivnica Orphanage  
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*Letter from the orphanage in Celje, Slovenia,  
that their pupil **DAVID SANDLES** died in 1948  
on tuberculosis. - Family San-dies archives.*



*Helga and Erika with mom Anna Hirsch, 1953*  
*Helga Wilson Archives.*