

Personal Recollections

Presentation by

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of Kikinda, Serbia
at the "Forgotten Genocide" Conference
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a tremendous honor to report to you about our work on a documentary concerning the various memorials erected in the Vojvodina since 2001.

These memorials exist for those Danube Swabians who perished in the camps through violence, illness and hunger.

I am thankful to Ann Morrison for this once in a lifetime opportunity to visit the United States of America. Her invitation to be with you at this conference has brought me much joy. She has enabled my dream of visiting America to become reality! It is with much enthusiasm that I look forward to visiting your country, and meeting new people so that when I return to my homeland I may report to them about my experiences and my newly forged friendships!

More than 60 years have passed since the dissolution of the last internment camps for those of German ethnicity living in Yugoslavia. After the entry of the Red Army in the fall of 1944 and the rise to power of the Tito-Partisans, the Tito appointed AVNOJ (Yugoslav abbreviation for the Anti-Fascist Council of the People's Liberation of Yugoslavia), an interim ruling commission of the Partisan Movement went into effect. The Yugoslavian citizens of German ethnicity, with very little exception, were declared to be without rights, were dispossessed, and interned in labor camps. Such camps for the civilian population, in which the new leadership interned the minority: Germans, Hungarians, and all those who were not sympathetic to the communist regime, continued to exist in Yugoslavia three years after the highly praised "Liberation of the People" throughout the land. For decades we remained silent about these camps, even denied their existence, but they did exist; in Rudolfsgnad, Gakowa, Kruschiewell, Jarmosch, Molidorf, Grossbetschkerek, Gross Kikinda – all throughout Vojvodina. The Vojvodina is a region of the Pannonian Lowlands north of the Drave and Danube Rivers.

According to the census, approximately a half million Germans lived in Yugoslavia between World War I and World War II. During World War II of these Germans, approximately 40,000 died in Uniform, 300,000 were evacuated and 56,000 died in camps constructed by the conquering forces. We will never know how many casualties there were in the streets on those first days and weeks after the "liberation movement", how many died in improvised prisons, or how many perished on killing fields. Many contemporaries maintain that the revenge of these so-called liberators was without restraint. They wanted in every way to prove their superiority. Many well-respected, innocent citizens were put to death by the penal authorities solely because of their wealth. Even though they were the minority, anyone suspected of associating with the so-called "guilty party" were also imprisoned. The highest authorities were aware of the atrocities taking place in the villages and the cities.

We know from eyewitness accounts of locals who lived near the camps and from the reports of former captives themselves, about the inhumane conditions that existed in these internment camps.

We also know that when captives could get close enough to the barbed wire fence to trade, farmers would receive gold rings or chains from detainees who had kept them well hidden from the guards, in exchange for a piece of bread.

Starting in 1946 there were quite a few Serbian men who married German women from the camps. The men did this to rescue the Danube Swabian girls from their suffering and from the hopelessness of their fate.

Even though the perpetrators buried their victims, the truth behind their horrific actions manifested itself again and again. The first was at the labor camp in Besdan in the Batschka, where half decayed bodies were gathered and reburied. Since the corpses were originally placed in shallow graves, the unbearable stench of rotting carcasses began to spread. As the river Theiss (Tisza) overflowed its banks, out spilled corpses from the mass grave at Rudolfsgnad. In Urog (Ürög-Hungarian; Irick-German) the corpses began to push themselves up out of their shallow, brick pit graves, and human appendages began to appear out of the mass graves on the killing fields. In Kula they needed to destroy the victim's remains with the industrial waste in the courtyard of the leather factory. In Batschka Topola a scorched lake revealed signs of its hidden victims. Later, they built tennis courts on this dried up waterway. In Novi Sad they built an oil refinery and roads over the mass grave, and governed the Danube Basin from there. In Kula they built new homes over them. In Rudolfsgnad, Bajmok and Ajka (Eikau in German) they slowly over the years transformed the location of mass graves back into farmland. Those from Mul'a were buried in the brickyard from Etschka, as well as in the ditches on the outskirts of town. The Ajka (Eikau-er) are on the leveled killing fields, those from Temerin are buried along the border of the cemetery in grave pits they dug themselves. Several Zabljaer(?) (in Hungarian as Zsablya or German as Josefdorf) were incinerated in the brickyard's oven. The Suboticas were buried in a hole next to the Mill (Mühlenplatz) at the very end of the cemetery and in the yards of the barracks. In Gross Betschkerek the "Enemies of the Regime" were abused in a liquidation camp known as the "Old Mill", in Sombor they tortured them in what was once a beautiful palace, the Kronik Palais. The secret police in Palanka let their victims drown in the Danube.

Purpose of the Memorial Site and Memorials

Beginning in the year 1994, the first memorial sites for the deceased in Vojvodina came into existence 50 or more years after the end of world war II, and were erected on the locations of mass graves or on the many destroyed, former German Catholic cemeteries. The building of memorials only began after the fall of Yugoslavia, and was made possible through the initiatives of private individuals, the various Danube Swabian Associations throughout Germany and Austria, and the world-umbrella organization of the Danube Swabians. The construction of these memorial sites in the Vojvodina proved difficult to organize because first, enormous trust issues needed to be overcome and much persuading was needed. After long discussions with the representatives of the various aforementioned organizations, and in cooperation with the German delegation and the local authorities, a few memorial projects were realized. The text on the plaques was subject to approval, changed several times, and via this process made certain that only the most essential and important wording remained. Currently, 35 memorials have been erected. This all began with the placing of a simple, wooden cross at the cemetery, the site of the death camp in Rudolfsgnad in the Serbian Banat.

Gedenkstätten der Donauschwaben Marta Istvan Josef Lang



Teletschka



Weprowitz



Moldorf



Sombor



Many Danube Swabians who lived through these experiences often ask why should we support the construction of such memorials in our old homeland? Do these memorials carry any meaning for our current or our future generations? Do they carry any messages for the former residents of the Vojvodina or for the post-war generation?

Memorial Crosses and Memorials serve to honor the dead

In the camps the practice of placing a cross on the graves of the dead was not condoned.

Despite all the hunger and sickness in the death camps, despite the symbolic erasing of inmates' dignity, by not allowing placement of grave crosses to honor the dead, those in charge delivered yet another severe psychological blow.

Gedenkstätten der Donauschwaben

Marta Istvan Josef Lang



To give an example of the ordeal gone through by those who are buried in these mass graves, a few sentences from the journal of Matthias Johler, who was a Minister in the death camps at Gakowa: The Priest's journal entry from the 9th of February 1946 ... "The crosses are ripped from the graves and tossed onto a pile of kindling; the burial mounds were made level with the ground. Just like criminals. Surely nothing shook our people more than this decree." Several Catholic priests were killed, or sent to the camps; used as deterrents in the first few days after the so-called liberation. The Atheists destroyed the Christian churches. In the Banat 23 Catholic churches were leveled after the war and the scrap material was reused to build animal stables.

The crosses, placed after more than 50 years, are today's memorials, a protest, and a battle against forgetting and against the disrespect of the dead. They are a silent remonstrance against the "Second Expulsion", the expulsion from our memory. A memorial tells the next generations, even if in a different form than written history, about a people who cease to exist, not even via a burial mound. The memorials are visible signs of our right to inquire and our right to action. In the poem "Jemand anderer" someone else, Erich Fried writes, „Tote Menschen / sind tote Menschen / wer immer sie waren / Wer nicht nachfragt / wie Menschen sterben / hilft sie töten.“ Dead people are dead people, whoever they once were, those that do not ask how people die help to kill them.

Memorials are the location of grief and sorrow

Those Danube Swabians who survived are also victims. They are now mostly in their 80's and 90's and still carry with them feelings of guilt. In their thoughts they are often burdened with the questions of why did they survive and not their friends, family, father or mother? For all of the survivors these memories and questions are forms of mourning. The knowledge that a memorial has been built where their deceased loved ones rest, can be a source of

healing for the survivors, a peaceful answer to their questions from those loved ones that remained behind at home.

Memorials give possibilities for Forgiveness

Before reconciliation comes forgiveness. The fragile peace in the Balkans is to this day, as it was in the past, a pawn in Europe's future harmonious co-existence. The construction of a memorial should have a reconciled Europe as its objective.

Memorials for all victims of the "liberation" in 1944

In the Vojvodina the first place where the post war victims were openly discussed was in the Batschka and based on this discussion, the Vojvodiner Hungarian Political Party members under the guidance of the local municipalities erected memorials in Subotica and Bajmok.



The residents of Subotica, of which there were many nationalities including Danube Swabians, were immortalized by having their names inscribed on a memorial, which stands at a mass grave on one of the largest cemeteries in Subotica. The memorial was dedicated on the "Tag der Toten" day of the dead in 1994. One of the initiators of this memorial was the mayor of Subotica at that time, Jozef Kasza. On that same day, under an acacia tree near Bajmok, a second memorial was dedicated in honor of those Danube Swabians and Hungarians shot to death on its killing

fields.

The dedication of the first memorial to the Danube Swabians

On November 4th 2001, in one of the once largest internment camps in Yugoslavia, not far from the Middle Banat district seat Gross Betschkerek, in Knicanin, the former Rudolfsgnad, the hand of reconciliation was extended. In this Banat town, between the years of 1944 and 1948 an extermination camp in which countless orphans, women, children, parents, and the elderly incapable of working, lived out their last remaining days in the most inhumane conditions solely because they were ethnic German. As fate would have it they would suffer from hunger, illness and cold; once their bodies were drained of any remaining life, they died. After several estimations it was determined that the remains of 3000 ethnic Germans were buried in a mass grave at the edge of a former catholic cemetery. In a second mass grave at the border of Telecka 9000 were buried. At the dedication of this memorial approximately 400, formerly expelled, local and international ethnic Germans, as well as very high profile political leaders, took part.

The quite and remote town must have been even more isolated 50 years ago from anyone who may have wanted to reveal the secret of the barbaric vengeance of the conquerors. But who were the conquered really? Children, women, and the old, they were what remained of the conquered. They were the first victims of the new ideological nonsense, that later praised itself as the most humane social order. Still no one understood back then, that the only true victor at the time was death.

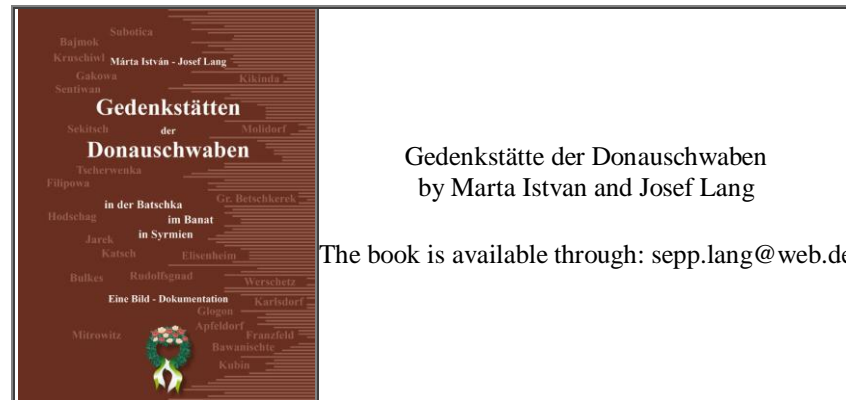
At the cemetery in front of the restored neo-gothic chapel the first speaker was the secretary of the municipality Knicanin, Srboljub Stojkovi. Thanks to the good will of the guests gathered at the dedication, Secretary Stojkovi accepted an offer of cooperation made to him by former countrymen, who either by expulsion or by their own choice left their former homeland, and who now live scattered all over the world. The sponsors of this collaboration were the university professor from Belgrade, Dr. Zoran Ileti head of the Society for Serbian-German Relations, The local leadership from Knicanin, and from the German side Lorenz Baron, a former resident of Rudolfsgnad and camp inmate. Based on the proposal and contributions from Mr. Baron donations were collected for the building of memorials on the two mass graves and for the reconstruction of the chapel on the cemetery. The Catholic chaplain Mr. Jakob Pfeifer from Hodschag, and the Episcopalian Minister from Valjevo Mr. Lavrentije, along with the choir from the orthodox clergy, performed the dedication and the commemoration celebration. In his speech Mr. Lavrentije said that these crimes against the ethnic German population were carried out by Atheists and not by the Serbian people. According to his words the coming of the atheists brought pain to the Serbian people and others of the Vojvodina, and it was because of and by these atheists that the crimes against humanity were carried out, for which they, the Serbian people still need to be ashamed of to this day. "What type of person, for three years, would not give these people a gram of salt?" –he asked. "That could only be done by the type of people who have no God in them" said the Episcopal Lavrentije. "In front of these mass graves we bow our heads in remembrance of those who were not allowed the decency of a burial-mound!"

We cannot turn back the hands of time, the majority of these people, be they victim or tormentor, are no longer with us, and so maybe it is no longer our concern to forgive ourselves for the evil that was committed, yet still it was discussed, and so the first path to reconciliation was paved.

Speeches followed from the head of the Danube Swabians in Germany, Mr. Morgenthaler, from event organizer Mr. Baron and from Professor Dr. Zoran Ileti a great Serbian Germanist. Additional speakers were the head of the German "Volksverband" people's organization from Subotica, Mr. Rudolf Weiss and a representative from the Neusatzter "Donau" club, Andreas Bürgermayer. The representatives from the German Consulate in Belgrade also took part in the memorial celebration. For the first time in more than 50 years the bells tolled in the new chapel, a gift from chaplain Jakob Pfeifer, for the souls of the deceased. After the memorial service, the participants made their way to the not so distant Telecka, the second of the mass graves where 9000 camp inmates now rest. A wreath laying ceremony was held. In the card files that were kept during that time in the camps at Rudolfsgnad, and that are currently housed in the historical archives in Zrenjanin, are the names, year of birth, place of birth and the death of each individual. Everyone has a number. In the column with the heading "cause of death", nothing was ever entered.

To this very day the world was only aware of one side of the story. We know up to now of the atrocities that the Germans committed; kept secret however was everything that happened to persons of German heritage after WWII. For the first time after 50 years it was openly said, that here once stood an internment camp for women, children and the elderly...

The book documenting the memorials of the Danube Swabians in the Batschka, Banat and Syrmien by Marta Istvan and Josef Lang



After Knicanin, the construction of memorials took place at the following mass gravesites: Kikinda (2002), Gakowa 2004, Kruschewill 2005, Mitrowitz 2008. In Molodorf a memorial was erected for the German citizens who lived there until 1947, later a plaque was added to remember those victims of the camps. The local communities along with Serbian community representatives also built memorials for the executed German citizens in Mramorak, Weprowatz, Hodschatz. In Karlsdorf a memorial stone was laid in 2004 for all those who perished between 1941 and 1951.

In the spring and again in the fall of 2009, Mr. Josef Lang, a Banater by birth from the town of Lazarfeld, a survivor of the camp „alte Mühle“ in Betschkerek, resident of Munich for the last 60 years, and myself Marta Istvan, took two tours through all three regions of the Vojvodina, the Batschka, Banat and Syrmien. Our goal was to visit all the memorials dedicated to the Donauschwaben that perished during the period of 1944 and 1948.

During our first tour in the spring, we traveled via bus. The majority of the memorial sites were built near the edges of various towns so, in order to reach many of them we needed to travel on foot. In many cases the victims were buried in the fertilizer processing plants, several kilometers outside of town. No signs or information are posted and when you ask for directions, no one can give you accurate information. For example, to find the village of Kruschewill, which today looks much like a ghost town, we needed to travel 5 kilometers further on foot, after we had disembarked our bus at the final stop at the edge of town. As we reached the former German community, now a town of ruins where only approximately 30 elderly people are living out their remaining days, we seemed close to our destination but there was nothing. Had a curious old man not stopped to help us, we never would have found the remains of the German cemetery. The parched ground, the hot sun, and our tour guide sent from God brought us to the realization that to accurately locate these various memorials, we must rely on the help of geographical data found using Google satellite imagery. For this reason we included them in our documentation.

The result of our trip is a book about these memorial sites. It is a document with both text and illustration about the initiative of those who began this memorial project, of their efforts on behalf of those Danube Swabians who are buried in the earth of the Vojvodina and the results that they have achieved until now. The publication of this book, although delayed by 10 years, still brings with it a certain easing of guilty feelings one has about leaving parents, siblings and grandparents buried in a long since unrecognizable mass grave without so much as a sign to indicate the final resting place of their next of kin, and about the godless randomness in which they were selected to die a martyr's death simply because they were German. This document looks to make these memorials more accessible to those who cannot undertake the trip to visit the sites themselves.

In addition to memorials for those who died in the camps, the book also encompasses memorials erected for those killed by firing squad. Also memorial plaques, for those long since deceased Danube Swabians, have been documented due to the deterioration and abandonment of the cemeteries in the Vojvodina. Documented, too are the memorial cemeteries erected in recent years. These new memorial cemeteries were constructed from remaining headstones reclaimed from the wilderness from the former German Catholic and Lutheran cemeteries. It was required after World War II, that the new local population uses the German Headstones, placed to honor the dead, to plaster their muddy courtyards.

The authors of this documentation would like, with this book, to thank and acknowledge those who had the foresight to begin such a project. This book is, just like the memorials themselves, a remembrance of the genocide of the Danube Swabians in the former Yugoslavia.