



DONAUSCHWABEN ISSUES ARTICLE

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Delivered to the Victors

An exhibition about the fate of the Danube Swabians
illustrates incredible events in Serbia

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For Herbert Rech, it was an encounter with the homeland of his ancestors. The Interior Minister of Baden-Württemberg, who also serves as his state's representative for expellees, refugees and emigrants, is a descendant of a family with Danube Swabian roots, though he was born after the war. Therefore, his statement at the opening of the exhibition "Daheim an der Donau - Zusammenleben von Deutschen und Serben in der Vojvodina" ("At home on the Danube - living together of Germans and Serbs in the Vojvodina"), that the trip to Novi Sad was a deeply personal matter for him, sounded in no way like just a polite phrase addressed to the host - particularly as Mr. Rech is also chairman of the Foundation Advisory Board of the "Donauschwäbisches Zentralmuseum" (Danube Swabian Central Museum) in Ulm, Germany. It was there that the exhibition opened over the weekend was prepared, in collaboration with the Museum of the Vojvodina in Novi Sad. Until middle of August it will be shown there, in the capital of the Vojvodina, one of the two formerly autonomous provinces of Serbia (the other being Kosovo).

This exhibition is something special and new for the Serbs, as well. It is the first time for their general public to see how the lives of the Germans in the Vojvodina ended in 1944/1945: with escape, dispossession, expulsion and mass murder. Their demise was not explained in Serbia until now. It could not be talked about in Tito's Yugoslavia, and it was hardly different after the European change in 1989. The crimes of Tito and his partisans were discussed in public for the first time under Milosevic; however, it presented an incomplete and distorted picture. In addition, the "Yugoslavian Disintegration Wars" caused so many new taboos, that the

pronouncement attributed to Churchill, that "the Balkans produced more history than they could digest", was still valid.

So the exhibition in Novi Sad is more than a collection of soup plates, cups, and costumes: it sheds light on a blind spot in the Serbian awareness of history. A spot, though, that is little known in Germany as well. Although the exhibition is not restricted to this bloody end only, that end represents its core. The renowned Serbian historian, Dr.Zoran Janjetovic, writes in the exhibition catalog,"The part of the German population that stayed in the Vojvodina after the invasion of the Red Army and the Partisan Units was in the first weeks subjected to mass shootings, arrests, mistreatment, looting, rapes, and forced labor. Partisan fighters and a part of the civilian population resorted to mass looting, mistreatment, and killing. There was no system to this violence, except that any atrocities were allowed."

The Germans in the Vojvodina were indiscriminately (and in an entirely organized way) hit by the victors' revenge. The exhibition does not conceal, however, that many had earlier been "exploited, or allowed themselves to be exploited, by National Socialism", as pointed out by the German historian Holm Sundhaussen. Of course there had been enthusiasm for Hitler, and voluntary military enlistment, as well as forced conscription to the SS. The catalog states," whether such evidence helps to legitimize the expulsion and dispossession of hundreds of thousands of people - the reader may decide."

In any case, it was above all these mass crimes that brought together the Danube Swabians like giant pincers. After all, the designation of these Germans as "Danube Swabians" was coined only in the twenties and had not been in use just a hundred years before. So also the Vojvodina, as a part of Serbia, came into existence only as a consequence of World War I, made up of three historical regions: East Sylvania (which

the Serbs call Srem), the Batschka, and the West Banat. The eastern part of the Banat was annexed by Romania after 1918. Just a little corner remained with Hungary. A small part also of the Batschka remained with Budapest; the larger one was allocated to the later Yugoslavia (with Serbia included). Syrmia was divided again after World War II: the larger eastern part was annexed by Serbia, the smaller one, with Vukovar as its capital, by Croatia. Altogether, in and after World War II, more than 50,000 Germans lost their lives violently in the Vojvodina, which today has about two million inhabitants, about as large as Hessen.. Up to 12,000 were deported to the Soviet Union. Under direction of the new regime, death camps were erected in many places in the Vojvodina. In order to get rid of the remaining Germans, from 1947 onwards Belgrade encouraged escape by relocating the camps closer to the Yugoslavia-Hungarian border. The remaining Germans left the country in the fifties and sixties. Though in 1921 more than 330,000 inhabitants considered German their native tongue, today only about 3,000 do so. The descendants of the others who had left come back from time to time to the home towns of their parents or of their childhood as organized group travelers. On the other hand, Zoran Janjetovic and other Serbian historians concerned about objectivity oppose the assertion that the suffering of the Germans in the Vojvodina was genocide. It was rather "just" a crime, they claim, for which a half-century later (and not far away from the Vojvodina) the term "Ethnic Cleansing" was coined. Such definitions are open to argument. Though the fact that this subject is now being discussed in Serbia is progress in itself. From September 2009 until January 2010 the exhibition "At home on the Danube" will be shown in the Danube Swabian Central Museum in Ulm, Germany, and afterwards at the consulate of Baden-Württemberg in Brussels, Belgium.

