

In Search of Homeland

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The wish for one's own village as a substitute for the lost fatherland The Banater in Southern France half a century after their settlement

Thanks to his cautious and wise manner, Robert Schuman succeeded in winning over the French government, which he presided, for the project of settling Banat Germans in France. The resistance came mainly from the ministry of interior, with Jules Moch at its head. He had lost his son in the war and opposed vehemently the settlement of former ethnic German members of the SS. However, Schuman and his close associates finally managed, in close cooperation with Johann Lamsfeld, and by pointing out the fate of their countrymen in Elsass and Lothringen, as well as the bilateral contracts between Romania and the German Empire, to clear out any doubts.

On July 17, 1948 the French council of ministers, at a session whose only topic was the settlement of Banater in France, decided to carry out the project. The transports began in November 1948 and went on until April 1949. The trains started off from Bregenz and crossed the French border at Kehl. Over 10,000 Banat Germans – in this number Lamesfeld also included the Germans from other German communities who registered themselves with the Committee as Banat Germans - had by then been moved to France from all occupation zones in Austria. In Colmar, at the initiative of the local newspaper owner Maxim Felsenstein, the town organized a big festival for the returnees. A hundred Banat Germans dressed in national costumes marched to the sounds of the Prinz Eugen March down to the warrior monument, laid down a wreath and pledged loyalty to France. A picture with symbolic character, which best depicts the inner division of the home-seeking group of Banater Schwaben. But where didn't one march, where didn't one pledge loyalty, where didn't one took oath over these ten years, in the middle of the past century, in the heart of Europe? And where didn't one search for his roots, shed light on national and social origins, put the sum of histories of many generations to a daily, politically-motivated test? Then, over fifty years ago, there where the Banater on their way. And they were on their way everywhere.

The Banater settlers in France settled in vineyards in Mittelwihr and Benwihr, some went to industrial regions of the country, but some also took the opportunity to migrate from there to Germany or the US. Starting from scratch was the easiest for craftsmen, for farmers it was more difficult as they could make their living only as fieldhands. Hans Kühlbürger – the guy from Lenaheim who had organised the goose thing for obtaining cyrillic letters for IDs, was the first who managed to turn the rocky terrain into a farmland, his own farmland. A fresh start was hard for teachers and intellectuals. Their certificates

were not recognized; they lacked the necessary language skills to be able to work in education. Despite these difficulties, one can conclude that by immigrating to France, the settlers finally took their destiny into their own hands and were able to choose the best option for them: staying in France or trying to migrate from there to Germany or the USA. The merit of Robert Schuman in making the France-action possible must be especially emphasized. Not only in the preparation for the action, as he underlined in his first letter to Johann Lamesfeld dated January 26, 1948, saying that “the migrants from Lothringen from 200 years ago have not been forgotten and they are nowadays being helped in their hour of despair”, but also during the action itself and in the following years, did he stretch his protective and supportive hand over the Banater Germans. Lamesfeld describes in his already mentioned book many other meetings with Schuman as minister president, foreign minister, justice minister or president of the European Parliament, in which Schuman demonstrated his solidarity with the Banater and had it substantiated with concrete steps.

It was owing to Schuman that France, unlike other classical migrant states, accepted all Banater who were willing to immigrate, regardless of age, occupation, and finally of their former affiliation with any particular arm of the German army. Of importance was also that his closest associates and advisors, among them his chief of office Rudolph Metzdorf, were also Lothringer and sympathetic to the Banater. Robert Schuman’s deeply humane orientation was in accordance with his upbringing and his inner posture, which, despite a changing life in German-French arena, left him a morally untarnished personality. He had been born in 1886 in Luxembourg, graduated from high school in Metz and studied in Bonn, Munich, Berlin and Strassburg. In WWI he had been an officer in the German army.

After Elsas-Lothringen went to France, he became a French citizen and an MP from Lothringen in the French parliament. He was secretary of state in the Petain government and was supposed to become the Gauleiter in Elsas-Lotringen. After he declined this post, he was arrested by the Gestapo. In Neustadt in Pfalz he spent two years in prison, and then managed to escape thanks to help from some local Germans. Unlike any other French politician, he spoke in favour of the reconciliation with Germany.

He was the mastermind behind the introduction of the Montaubanion and already in 1952 he spoke for a European community. This standpoint cost him his post, but it corresponded with his idea of cohabitation of people, founded on his experiences as a Lothringer in two world wars, torn apart between two cultures, nations and states. He was called “Father of Europe”. Robert Schuman died in 1963. In 1989 in Metz, an institute was founded, whose goal has been the canonization of Schuman. To this aim, six boxes and 150 kilos of documents were handed over to the Vatican Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Perhaps among these, there are also, listed and documented, his merits for the settlement of Banater in France?

His counterpart on the Banater side was Johann Lamesfeld, whose ancestors had come

from the Lothringer Thionville to Großsanktnikolaus. Johann Lamesfeld was born a son of a teacher in Blumenthal. He attended the preparatory German grammar school in Temeswar and then grammar school in Schässburg. He graduated in state science in the province capital Bukarest, which helped him rise in the Romanian state service as a senior finance inspector. From Hatzfeld where he was last employed, he fled with his family to Austria, where, owing to his authority and his abilities, he organized his countrymen and became a negotiator with the French occupation force. The settlement of Banater in France and the settlement of the village La Roque sur Pernes is still associated with his name. He himself moved to La Roque and looked after the reconstruction of the village. On its completion, he taught German in the Jesuit grammar school in Avignon. He died in 1981 in Paris at his daughter Ilse. He was buried in the cemetery in Carpentras, near La Roque sur Pernes, by his wife Elisabeth, nee Sedlak, from Grabatz.

The idea to find a village for those Banater who would gladly live on their own ground and soil, was as fascinating as it was bold. The village was found in the Provence, where an old farmer from Lothringen, whom the war had brought to La Roque, read about the Banater who search for land in the Colmar Latest News. The Banater had in this newspaper their own weekly supplement, which served to maintain contact with each other and to publish important news for the settlers.

The old Lothringer showed the paper to the mayor of La Roque, Edouard Delebecque. He was a university professor for the Greek language and literature, and, what was also important in this case, a party comrade of Robert Schuman. He wrote to the minister president and indicated the possibility to settle there the former Lothringer from Banat. A week later Lamesfeld was there to see the location. Delebecque was clearly in favour of the settlement of Banater, as was the prefect of the Vaucluse department, Jacques Boissier. The first obstacle was overcome. In 1950 La Roque seemed like a decaying village. Only 17, mostly old people, lived in the village. Of the former 1070 hectares of arable land in 1862, almost 100 years later, only 55 hectares were still being cultivated, the primary school was abandoned, many houses were in ruins. Out of 32 farmhouses, only eight were inhabited. Bare fields were covered with copse and stones.

The Phyloxera vine pest, which had come from America, destroyed the vineyards. The mayor Edouard Delebecque was just working on a book whose title should have read "A dying village". It even came out in 1951. However, at this time were the first Banater already there, and the development of the village took an upward path. Very soon, Lamesfeld found ten families who wanted to go to La Rocque. On October 18, 1950, came the first family with seven members in a truck. Up to October 1952 came eight families with forty members. The last Banater came in 1966. There are 98 people who were born in Banat living in Roque sur Pernes at present. Between 1950 and 1980, 104 children, whose parents had come from Banat, were born in Vaucluse department. The first child born in La Roque is Erika Hockl, whose godfather was the prefect of the department, which can be read in a research on population growth in La Roque sur Pernes published in 1980.