

In Search of Homeland

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Banat Donauschwaben in Southern France, half a century after their settlement

In the memory culture of Banater Schwaben, the most memorable events are those which had to do with traumatic experiences of our group: escape, deportations, confiscation, disenfranchisement, discrimination, resettlement. The grounds for that are historical, with one rather narrow view of things at its core. Exactly as many events and data from our history are linked to our excellent creative abilities, but they found only a limited entry into our collective memory. We should search for them more often and more intensively, bring them to light and discuss them. Only thus can we make it possible for the next generation to acquire our history with its numerous affirmative and progressive periods and elements. It is to that end that we tell the story of the Banater Schwaben who fled to Austria during World War Two and settled afterwards in France, particularly in the mountain village of La Roque sur Pernes in Provence.

“Welcome my dear countryman Lamesfeld. I also have Lothringischer origin like you. Please tell me what bothers you.” It was with these words that the French minister president Robert Schumann welcomed the President of the Committee of Banat Elsas-Lothringians, Johann Lamesfeld, who describes this reception in the book “From Austria to France. The Banat action and Robert Schumann”, published in Salzburg in 1973. It is a key episode in the history of settlement of the Banat Germans in France, which took place primarily owing to personal efforts of two people. In the chaos of post-war period, the first years of shaping new state, political, and legal structures, they made helping a group of German refugees the priority in their activities. On the one hand the French Minister president of an ally power from World War Two, on the other a Banat lawyer and tax officer, who, thanks to his charisma and forcefulness, spoke for his countrymen who were in dire straits. What the two had in common was the same Lothringischer origin. As Heinrich Lauer once said, “it did not oblige to anything, but made many things possible.”

Austria after the war: every fourth citizen was a refugee

After the war, Austria was, like Germany, divided into four occupation zones. An allied Control Council was established with its seat in Vienna. The Allies remained even after the formation of an Austrian government, which gradually took over ever more rights and was responsible for refugee matters. The Austrian population of 6 million was confronted with 1.6 million refugees, displaced persons and evacuees, of whom about 1 million spoke different language. The number of Volksdeutschen reached 300000. The

central advisory office of Volksdeutschen in Vienna functioned as their point of contact, later it was the provincial advisory offices in separate provinces. Their material, legal and social position can be described as extremely difficult. Austria hoped for the execution of the Potsdam Conclusions, which had foreseen the return of Volksdeutschen to Germany, and took no steps to help this group integrate. The refugees were stateless and constantly strove to obtain residence permit, whose validity was limited to two months. In order to be able to work, they needed work permit, for which equality permit was a prerequisite. It was almost impossible to obtain. The Volksdeutsche students had to pay the tuition fee which was three times higher than for Austrian students. One could trade only with a formal consent of the provincial president. Even the local authorities used the option of introducing restrictions to protect the locals, whose sense and reason one cannot grasp even today. For example: in the area around the Mondsee, the Volksdeutsche could use public transport only with the consent of the mayor. A long list of books on the integration of refugees and displaced persons in Austria features numerous publications by Adalbert Karl Gauss, Bruno Oberlauer, Anton Scherer and Erwin Marschunze, all of whom document the fate of Banater Schwaben in Austria within a large group of refugees. Like in Germany, so were in Austria churches and church organisations those who pressurized the occupation powers and authorities to improve the conditions for the refugees. It was only in the fifties and sixties, through the so-called Option Law in 1954, when the Volksdeutsche got an opportunity to opt for the Austrian citizenship, then through the German-Austrian Agreement in 1961, which foresaw the compensation for refugees – with Germany paying the lion's share – and the Foreign Pension Handover Law in 1962, that the legal and material improvement of the situation for the Volksdeutsche refugees was attained.

However, back in 1945 and 1946, irrespective of the bureaucratic discrimination and miserable living conditions in camps, a further huge uncertainty bothered the refugees. Neighbouring countries like Yugoslavia made demands for the return of their citizens who collaborated with Germany; the Soviet Union needed labour force for the reconstruction of the land, from the home countries of the Volksdeutschen came stories of deportations, transportations and expropriation. Particularly in the Soviet occupation zone was the situation threatening. Gossip of the transport of the Volksdeutschen to Siberia never ceased.

Appeal to France in hours of despair

In this situation Johann Lamesfeld took the initiative and made first steps modelled on his countrymen Dr. Franz Buding and Senator Dr. Emmerich Reitter in the French occupation zone in Germany, to bring his people under French protection. Their particular affinity to France and their appeals to France in the hour of despair are known. Interestingly enough, this turning to France shortly after the war's end began in Germany, but also in Banat itself. In Temesvar, the lawyer Dr. Stefan Frecot as

President of the legal entity “Alliance of descendants of former French settlers in Banat” pointed out in 1945 in his paper titled “Les Francais du Banat” that ancestors of many Banater Schwaben had originally come from Elsas and Lothringen, so they had French origin. The goal of this action by Frecot was to protect his countrymen and members of this alliance from repressions. His turning to France, however, was not new. During the peace talks after World War One, he was received by the French foreign minister Clemenceau in August 1919 in Paris and handed him over a resolution, as a representative of the German-Swabian party, asking for the unification of the whole of Banat with Romania. In his search for the possibilities to support his people in Austria, Johann Lamesfeld was aided by officers from the French occupation forces. They were people who acted out of sheer Christian philanthropy: church people in French uniforms, or people who themselves came from Elsas and Lothringen area and had understanding for the situation their brothers and sisters were in. They helped Lamesfeld with the opening of a bureau in Vienna, where his countrymen could register for the emigration to France. When there was an order in the Soviet zone, to register all Volksdeutschen and bring them together from different places in cattle cars, Lamesfeld had IDs of the Committee of the Banater Elsas/Lothringer printed, which identified their holders as Frenchmen from Banat. The official-looking ID was printed in four languages; for Cyrillic letters, the countryman Hans Kuhlburger from Lenauheim had to bring one more goose to Vienna – an additional bribe for the printing office. It soon turned out that the ID served its purpose. The Volksdeutschen were safe. Johann Lamesfeld's attempt to bring Banater to France was at first prevented. And despite positive reports from French officers, who were reassigned to Vienna for archive duties and who could report that many Elsaser and Lothringer really had moved to Banat in the 18th century. It was an instruction from the French government to carry out the action, it was reported officially. Unofficially, the French occupation power was so helpful as to make it possible for the Banater to reach the French zone via the American zone. The camp Kematen in Tirol became a huge collection point for Banat refugees.

In Banater Heimhaus in Wurzburg there is a big collection of beautiful puppets dressed in national costumes, which were made by Banat women in Germany and made available for this institution. In Lenauheim in Banat as well. It was one such puppet in Swabian national costume that was made of rags by Banat women in a camp in Austria – certainly not so beautiful and colourful as those in Lenauheim and Wurzburg – that became a bearer of message for help and support for the Banater in Austria.

Addressee: Robert Schumann, the prime minister of France. Addressor: Johann Lamesfeld, president of the Committee of the Banater of French origin. The letter was sewn in the hem of the skirt. It passed through the customs and censorship unnoticed. The answer came after two weeks: “I have received your puppet and the letter. I, as a Lothringer, know the history of the Banater and I will make sure that you - my Banater countrymen – find a new homeland in France”. The letter, which was in French, had an additional sentence in German: “With heart-felt greetings, your R.Schumann.” It was the key to success.