

Foreword – Such Were the Times

Early on 29 January 2010, following a conference on issues of world development and peace, I searched for a free table where I could have my breakfast quietly in the dining hall of a Berlin hotel. Not seeing a free table, I asked a man sitting alone if I could join him. Right away he asked me where I was from, and with the explanation of “the former Yugoslavia”, I added, “from Belgrade”. “I was born in Apatin,” the man said. I looked up at him and only then did I notice that he was a Catholic priest. It was clear that the man was no longer living in Apatin, so I asked him what had happened. He was born in Apatin during the war; as a four-year-old, he and his family were placed in a camp for Germans and later expelled to Germany. A camp? What sort of camp, where they kept children? I was confused. A camp in Kruševlje, he replied (a village near Apatin I had never heard of, so I thought it must be the town of Kruševac in central Serbia). I asked him what brought him to the conference, and he said he worked for the Catholic organisation Misereor (he didn't say he was its director), that he spent a good portion of his life in Latin America, fighting for the rights of people threatened by dictatorships and repression. He left quite an impression on me.

Though I never got in touch with him again, still, for me the story of the Danube Swabians begins with Josef Sayer in 2010. I told my colleagues in the Centre for Nonviolent Action (CNA) about Josef from Apatin and we decided we wanted to do something to find out more and tell others about what had happened. At the end of that year a preliminary study was done and there we stopped, before resuming three years later.

Support for continuing the research was not motivated by a desire to right a wrong committed against people almost seventy years ago, though several of my colleagues' personal stories are also marked by German ancestry. Our interest lay more in the need to make injustice visible and thereby recognised, and to honour the victims, thereby making our present better and drawing a parallel with injustices of more recent times that are still treated as recent even though they date back to the wars of the 1990s.

Just as the Swabians of Vojvodina are unpopular victims, generally believed to have gotten their just deserts (collectively), there are also unpopular victims in more recent history, hidden in the layers of narratives about just wars: our own innocent victims as opposed to their guilty ones. [...]

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The Foreword in Book is longer!!!