

Narrating the Danube Swabian Identity and Experience from Women's Perspective

Gendered Memories of a Culture in Transition

Agatha Schwartz

Abstract: This article uses selected memoirs by American women who came from the Danube Swabian minority in present-day Hungary and Serbia (former Yugoslavia). The entire ethnic group was expelled from the region at the end of World War II. All five memoirs were published in the new millennium. This article examines how the narratives frame memories of a prewar happy childhood from young women's perspective. The childhood memories are presented in stark contrast to the authors' postwar experiences of expulsion, sexual violence, genocide, flight, and the eventual building of a new life in a new country. All narratives document the brutality with which the Danube Swabian communities were destroyed, particularly in Yugoslavia. Nostalgic overtones about a lost homeland intersect with a lasting feeling of being *atopos*—i.e., "of no place," in exile and in the diaspora. While most of the narratives emphasize Danube Swabian victimhood, one narrative stands out in its attempt to create a more multidirectional approach to memory about World War II. agathas@uottawa.ca

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Biography: Agatha Schwartz, PhD, is emeritus professor of German and world literatures and cultures at the University of Ottawa. Her research interests are nineteenth–twenty-first century Central European literature and culture, women's writing, and narratives of trauma. Her most recent publications include *Wartime Violence, Trauma, and Resilience in the Narratives of German Canadians* (Ottawa: Legas, 2022); "Trauma, Haunting, and the Limits of Narration in Gabi Köpp's *Warum war ich bloß ein Mädchen*, Leonie Biallas's '*Komm, Frau, raboti*.' *Ich war Kriegsbeute*, and Renate Meinhof's *Das Tagebuch der Maria Meinhof*" (*Seminar* 57.1, 2021); and "Challenging Tradition and Crossing Borders: Women's Activism and Literary Modernism in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy" (in *The Routledge International Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, 2021).

Introduction

Danube Swabians lived in the area that today comprises southwest Hungary, the province of Vojvodina in present-day Serbia, Eastern Croatia, and the Romanian Banat. Following the gradual demise of the Ottoman Empire from the late seventeenth century onward, these depopulated areas were populated with various ethnic groups as part of Habsburg policies.



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By the early twentieth century, the Danube Swabians¹ were firmly established in these areas. Although they originated in different parts of the Habsburg Empire, the term that began to be used in the interwar years reflects their increasing national self-awareness and identification. With the Nazi takeover of Germany in 1933, the influence of Nazi Germany on German ethnic minorities across East Central Europe—commonly referred to as “Volksdeutsche” as opposed to the “Reichsdeutsche,” who were citizens of the German Reich—led to many of their male members joining or being drafted into the Waffen-SS, and some more specifically into the notorious Prinz Eugen division.² At the end of the war, under a “collective guilt” policy, numerous members of this ethnic group would be deported as forced laborers to the Soviet Union, many never to return. In their homelands, most “Volksdeutsche” lost their rights of citizenship and property and were forced to leave under the most inhumane conditions.³ The worst episode of this expulsion happened in what would become communist Yugoslavia, whose genocidal policies led to the deaths of tens of thousands of Danube Swabians (mostly women, children, and the elderly) in concentration camps (a term used by the communist authorities themselves).

Using selected memoirs by women who belonged to this German-speaking ethnic minority group, this paper will examine the ways in which the authors frame their pre–World War II childhood memories of Hungary and the former Yugoslavia and how these memories contrast with those of what followed; i.e., expulsion and genocide, as well as the eventual building of a new identity. Today, these elderly authors live as part of the Danube Swabian diaspora in the US. They published their memoirs only in the new millennium: *A Pebble in My Shoe* (Katherine Hoeger Flotz, 2004); *Blessed as a Survivor* (Elizabeth M. Wilms, 2013); *Kruschevlje* (Therese Herscha [Schmidt] and Ricardo Quiñónez, 2007); *Casualty of War* (Luisa Lang Owen, 2003); and *Bread on My Mother's Table* (Ingrid Andor, 2007). All the narrators, except for Andor, who belongs to the post-generation born in the US and whose narrative is based on her mother's story, were young girls during the war.

Hoeger Flotz was born in the town of Gakowa (today Gakovo) in the Batschka region of former Yugoslavia in 1938. At the age of eight, she and her family were put in a concentration camp established for ethnic Germans in her hometown. She survived with her aunt and uncle, but her

¹ In the following, I will be using “Danube Swabians,” “Swabians,” and “ethnic Germans” interchangeably, as this reflects both the popular and academic references to this ethnic group in the given context.

² The Prinz Eugen division—or the 7th SS Volunteer Mountain Division “Prinz Eugen,” as per its official name—was formed in the spring of 1942. While it fought against Tito's Partisans in different parts of Yugoslavia, it committed “exceedingly brutal” acts both against the Partisans and against the civilian population in Croatia and Serbia (Schiessl 2019: 201-202).

³ The Danube Swabians in Hungary who lived in or were born from mixed marriages were exempted from these policies (Barber xviii).

mother succumbed to typhoid fever. They fled via Hungary and Austria to Germany and in 1949 emigrated to Chicago. Her father fell as a German soldier during the siege of Budapest in 1945.

Elizabeth Wilms was also born in 1938, in the village of Hettin (Hetin in Serbian, Hetény in Hungarian) in the Banat, also in former Yugoslavia, and grew up in nearby Soltur (today Banatsko Veliko Selo). Members of her family went through the ordeal of various camps, including Gakowa, but both her parents survived the war, her mother as a forced laborer somewhere in the Soviet Union and her father as a POW. Wilms's route of exile was similar to Hoeger Flotz's: they crossed from Gakowa into Hungary illegally, and then continued their clandestine journey via Austria to Germany. Her family emigrated to Chicago only in 1955.

Theresa Herscha (Schmidt) was born in Großbetschkerek (Nagybecskerek in Hungarian, Zrenjanin in Serbian), also in the Banat, in the mid-1930s. (She provides no exact date of birth.) She survived the camp at Kruschevlje (Kruševlje in Serbian, Kruschiwl in German). With her mother and younger sister, she managed to flee in 1947 over the border into Hungary and from there to Austria where all three were eventually reunited with her father. A few years later, still at a refugee camp in Austria, she met her future husband and they had a young son. Her husband emigrated to Montreal, and she followed him with the rest of the family in 1952. A few years later, they all moved to Chicago.

Ingrid Andor is the daughter of a Danube Swabian woman survivor of the Kruschevlje camp. She wrote down the story of her mother, Maria, who escaped from the camp via Hungary to Austria and eventually reached Chicago, in 1951.

Finally, there is Luisa Lang Owen, who was born in 1935. In 1944, she and her family were put into the notorious Rudolfsnad (Knićanin) camp in the Banat. She lost several family members in that camp while her cousin Seppi was forcibly separated from his grandmother and put into a Serbian orphanage for several years. She, her mother, and aunt underwent a different journey into freedom. First they were consigned as laborers in Bor, Serbia. From there, via a few other stations, and reunited with her father, they reached Osijek (Eszék) in Croatia. Eventually, they, too, went to Austria, and then to Germany. Lang Owen emigrated to Cincinnati on her own, with her parents joining her only later.

In my analysis of the narratives, I focus on transitions: a first transition, from the representation of Danube Swabian life and identity before the war to the deportation and experiences in the camps established by Tito's regime in Yugoslavia; a second transition, involving the journey into exile via Hungary, Austria, and Germany; and, finally, a third transition, toward a new life after the war in the American Danube Swabian diaspora. Through a close reading of the narratives, I will examine the construction of Danube Swabian victimhood and memory in the narratives, and the tension between the affirmation of a new life in "freedom" versus a lasting feeling of being *atopos*;—i.e., "of no place"—as defined by Pierre Bourdieu.

Historical Background

Following Hungary's 1941 occupation of the Batschka (or Bácska), which had been part of Yugoslavia since 1920, some 533,045 people in the country now identified themselves as ethnic Germans, while 719,762 declared German as their mother tongue. Known as the "német kisebbség" (the German minority), the Danube Swabians were thus the largest ethnic minority in Hungary during World War II. While the atrocities committed against the Danube Swabians as a group were a policy established by the post-World War II communist regimes of both Hungary and Yugoslavia, they were built on pre-existing anti-German sentiments going back to the interwar years. Some Hungarian politicians and intellectuals warned not only against the allegedly nefarious influence of the Jews but also that of the Swabians (svábok). For example, the right-wing student association Turul agitated against both ethnic groups, and Miklós Horthy himself was favorable to the idea of "repatriating" the "much loved" Hungarian Swabians. Mirna Zakić has found evidence of increasing anti-German animosity in interwar Yugoslavia among some local Serbs, in particular in the Serbian Banat, with beatings and even the occasional murder of some ethnic German activists. However, Zakić contends that there is no evidence of any planned mass murder of the local German population prior to the outbreak of World War II in Yugoslavia in 1941 (Zakić 2017: 55)

After the establishment of the communist regimes in both Hungary and Yugoslavia, the situation changed. Although there were differences in the two countries regarding the degree of abuse inflicted on the Danube Swabians, the ethnic Germans in both places were now considered politically unreliable (given the allegiance of a considerable number of their members to Nazi Germany during the war), were undesired as citizens in the post-World War II realities, and were painted with collective guilt so as to justify their ill-treatment as a group. This enabled their mistreatment in addition to the loss of their civil rights, citizenship, and property. In both cases, the motivation was not only political but also economic. In Hungary, their property was given to Hungarians who had been transferred from neighboring countries, in particular from Romania, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia (Paikert 1967: 198). Paikert attributes the expulsion of the Hungarian Swabians to Soviet policy, which was profoundly anti-German, but he adds that the majority of Hungarians did next to nothing to aid their former neighbors (Paikert 1967: 210).

In Yugoslavia, the political situation was different, because of the specific dynamics and consequences of World War II. The outbreak of the war in Yugoslavia in 1941 and the ensuing breakup and occupation of its territories brought about a difficult situation for the Danube Swabians, who were now split up between three states: the fascist Croatian *ustasha* state, Hungary, and Serbia under the control of the German Reich (Casagrande 2016: 231). Both in Hungary and the Banat (under German control), many able-bodied Volksdeutsche men were conscripted and served in the Prinz Eugen SS Division (Zakić 2014: 329). Thomas Casagrande adds that while joining the various German armed units (including the Wehrmacht and the police) was voluntary in the beginning, with some Volksdeutsche signing up enthusiastically, it gradually became compulsory, as Nazi Germany needed more recruits, and was done under

pressure and with the threat of the “gravest punishments” (Casagrande 2016: 239-40). Christoph Schiessl contends that “ethnic Germans not under direct control of Nazi authorities, as in Hungary until 1944, were divided in their support for Germany and many did not support the Nazi cause or only did so reluctantly and under great pressure” (Schiessl 2019: 195). Without taking away from the responsibility of the Danube Swabians for participating in and supporting the inhumane actions of the German armed forces, Casagrande underlines the incredible cruelty of the Yugoslav theater of war, in which torture, rape, and murder were practiced by all sides, including episodes in which members of the ethnic German civilian population in other regions of Yugoslavia were murdered by Partisans (Casagrande 2016: 246). War crimes committed by the Partisans, however, were a taboo subject for a long time.⁴ In addition to the participation of the Danube Swabians in armed combat against the Partisans, leading Danube Swabian activists and their supporters also contributed to the Holocaust by participating in the abuse, round-up, and execution of the Jews in some Banat towns;⁵ they further profited from the so-called “Aryanization” of Jewish property (Zakić 2014: 330-32).⁶

While in Hungary the policy regarding the treatment of the Danube Swabians as a group was very much the result of Soviet influence, in Yugoslavia it was an internal decision taken by the local communist leadership that soon severed ties with the Soviet Union. What enabled the ensuing inhumane actions was a resolution from November 11, 1944 by the AVNOJ.⁷ This resolution proclaimed the collective guilt of the Danube Swabians and declared them “enemies of the people” (Arbeitskreis Dokumentation 1995: 71). As in Hungary, they lost their civic rights, but in addition they were also reduced to *bare life* (Agamben) and could be treated as such—beaten, tortured, raped, murdered—with no consequences.⁸ Their property was seized by

⁴ Tito tolerated massacres against all his opponents, including the ethnic Germans, although some of this is only recently being discovered: “In the past years, more and more mass graves are being unearthed, leading to calls for a debate” (*Die Vergessenen* 2015: 16).

⁵ The Holocaust in Yugoslavia is another complex chapter given the different administrative units under which dismembered and occupied Yugoslavia belonged. The Banat Jews, for example, were deported to Belgrade and most of them perished through the use of gas vans. Sadly, Serbia became the first state in Europe to exterminate its Jewish population. The Bácska Jews, under Hungarian occupation until 1944, were deported to Auschwitz along with the majority of the Hungarian Jews after Nazi Germany invaded Hungary in the spring of 1944. According to the Holocaust Encyclopedia, 82,242 Jews lived in Yugoslavia in 1941, of whom 67,228 were murdered in the Holocaust (“Jewish Losses”).

⁶ Zakić contends, however, that the greatest profiteer from the stolen property of the Banat Jews was Nazi Germany. The Reich also appropriated major factories and other successful enterprises previously owned by wealthy local Jews (Zakić 2014: 338).

⁷ The AVNOJ (acronym for the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia—Antifašističko Veće Narodnog Oslobođenja Jugoslavije) was the umbrella organization of the Yugoslav Communist Party under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito established during World War II to coordinate the Partisans’ military campaigns (“Anti-Fascist Council”).

⁸ In my use of Agamben’s term I rely on Holger Pötsch’s analysis of the wartime diary *A Woman in Berlin*, by Anonymous. Pötsch explains that the arrival of the Red Army in Berlin created a situation in which German women’s status as citizens and historical subjects was destabilized and lowered to the level of bare life: “In the

the new Yugoslav state, the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia. Additionally, a total of 389,000 hectares of land were taken from the Danube Swabians in Vojvodina and a large part given to new settlers from other parts of the country (Jankov 2005: 100). Similar to Hungary proper, the Swabians were expelled and confined to camps. Yet there was a significant difference in their treatment under Tito's regime. In Hungary, confinement to camps was only temporary and the number of internees was significantly lower. Paikert estimates this number at 2,000, with most of them released after a few months (Paikert 1967: 199). In Tito's Yugoslavia, numerous concentration camps were established for the ethnic German population. The total number of ethnic Germans who died in Yugoslav camps is estimated at 50,000, of whom 48,700 were Danube Swabians—a number equivalent to thirty percent of all those interned between 1944 and 1948.⁹ If the victims of revenge killings and those who succumbed to years of forced labor are added to these figures, the total number of the Yugoslav Germans who perished comes close to 65,000, of whom 60,000 were Danube Swabians (Arbeitskreis Dokumentation 1995: 110).¹⁰ Dragomir Jankov adds that 65 percent of the Swabian civilians who died in the camps in Vojvodina were women and children: "23,968 women and 5,057 children died due to illness and exhaustion" (Jankov 2005: 104).¹¹

What happened to the Danube Swabians of Yugoslavia at the end of World War II and in the years following the war falls within the UN definition of genocide. Article II of the United Nations "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide" stipulates the following as genocidal acts:

- (a) Killing members of the group
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group

When we look at the above figures and at the conditions in the camps, we can say that the Tito regime was responsible for genocide against this group according to at least three of the five qualifying acts : (a) numerous Danube Swabians were executed, beaten, or tortured to death;

case of rape this new status decisively hampered individual women's ability to maintain their corporeal integrity—to control the borders of their own bodies" (15). I argue that the situation in which the Danube Swabians found themselves was very similar, at all levels, not only regarding sexual violence that was inflicted on the women.

⁹ These numbers include other ethnic German groups in Yugoslavia, such as the Gottschee Germans in Slovenia.

¹⁰ Blumenwitz sets the numbers somewhat lower. He estimates the total number of deaths of the ethnic German civilians in Yugoslavia at 59,335, of which 53,980 were in Vojvodina. For the deaths in the camps alone, he gives a total of 48,447 in Yugoslavia, of which 44,432 were in Vojvodina (qtd. in Jankov 2005: 104).

¹¹ Ethnic Hungarians were another persecuted group, although not to the same extent as the Germans. Jankov quotes 20,000 as the number of Hungarians executed (Jankov 2005: 106).

(c) the conditions in the camps led directly to the internees dying from hunger, disease, torture, and other forms of physical abuse, including sexual abuse; and (d) thousands of Danube Swabian children were forcibly taken to orphanages in Yugoslavia, most never to be returned to their families. The narratives analyzed will further elaborate on this point.

Creating Figures of Memory

Following decades of silence in the collective memory of both Hungary and Yugoslavia (now Serbia), the new millennium has seen this repressed violent chapter of history gain some official recognition by both the Hungarian and Serbian governments. In Hungary, in 2012, January 19 was declared the official national day of remembrance for the expulsion of the German minority. In 2017, Serbia inaugurated a monument to the Danube Swabian civilian victims at the site of the Jarek/Bački Jarak concentration camp located north of Novi Sad, in the province of Vojvodina. Monuments have also been erected in other villages that had been turned into concentration camps between 1945 and 1948. In addition, numerous narratives have been published both by survivors living in emigration as well as by researchers, writers, and artists interested in the stories of the Danube Swabians. In the new millennium especially, there have been historical reappraisals of the German minority in Hungary and their contributions throughout the centuries, as well as their treatment both at the end of the war and after.¹² Recent narratives to come out of Hungary include the internationally acclaimed 2018 film by Attila Szász, *Örök tél* (Eternal Winter) and the novel *Hazátlanok* (Without a Homeland), by Judit Kováts, published in 2019.¹³ A similar revival of interest in the fate and culture of the Danube Swabians can also be observed in Serbia.¹⁴

According to Jan Assmann, figures of memory are cultural expressions of a common past. This includes monuments (such as those mentioned above) or rituals, among them "institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance)" (Assmann 1995: 129), as well as textual expressions. The narratives included in my analysis constitute an attempt to create figures of memory about an historical episode that for decades has existed only as part of the communicative memory of the Danube Swabians, yet without any inclusion in the broader national cultural memory of the countries from which they were expelled. Assmann defines "communicative memory" as the memory that can live on within families through oral transmission, but that may or may not become part of the "cultural memory"; that is, mediated through symbolic systems of institutional expressions (Assmann 1995: 129). Not only do the

¹² See, for example, Tóth 2018; Bognár and Márkus 2015.

¹³ The topic of the expulsion of the Hungarian Danube Swabians was addressed already in the 2011 documentary film by historian Dr. John C. Swanson (University of Tennessee at Chattanooga), *About a Village*.

¹⁴ For example, Nenad Stefanović (1996) based his book on his interviews with Danube Swabian exiles in Germany. Further, Nadežda Radović et al. in 2000 and 2001, respectively, edited two volumes about Danube Swabian women in Serbia specifically.

narratives under scrutiny contribute to the production of cultural memory, but their reading also allows us to raise questions of memory creation and transmission.

Lang Owen formulates her own awareness about the workings of memory in the preface to her memoir:

Looking for the true color of memory, its absolute accuracy, is like looking for the color of a painting as it was when the artist painted it, centuries ago. To the experience of the painting, the search for its "true" color is irrelevant. *Memories, like sensuous images, are not verifiable like facts*. As experience expressed, *they can, however, be known*. The act of recalling my experiences was a celebratory act, and the best of my memory was offered to clarify the larger event, the experience in common (Lang Owen 2003: xxvi, emphasis added).

Lang Owen expresses here in her own words what scholars have already stated; namely, that narratives grown out of a traumatic experience that rely on traumatic memories "cannot be weighed on the scale of truth and falsehood. Rather, they indicate ways in which an individual interprets his [her] past and the intensity of the loss which has been suffered" (Hollo 2013: 283).

Memories of a Pre–World War II Danube Swabian Life and Identity

In all five narratives, memories of the pre–World War II life in Danube Swabian communities occupy an important place. The community is often depicted in idealized, even stereotypical tones. Andor, a descendant of Danube Swabian immigrants in the US, calls the Danube Swabians "one of the most well-adjusted, strong, self-willed, loving people still alive on this earth" (Andor 2007: 85); people who are "resourceful, tenacious, hardworking, proud, practical, responsible" (Andor 2007: 123). Wilms goes one step further. Not only does she define members of her ethnic group as hardworking and thrifty, but as also superior to the other ethnic groups with whom they cohabitated in the same village (Serbs, Croats, and Hungarians). Unlike them, according to the author, the Swabians exhibit "organization and neatness" (Wilms 2013: 6). An overtone of German racial superiority may reverberate in such statements, a possible remnant of Nazi ideology, which is not referenced by the author. Not all memoirs, however, agree with such an idealized picture of the Danube Swabian community. Some pinpoint poor human relations in villages where gossip thrives and where people—such as Lang Owen's mother—who exhibit unconventional behavior are often criticized. The politics of Magyarization in the past are also exposed to some criticism. While some families changed their names, others, like the narrator's family, found such changing of one's identity objectionable (Lang Owen 2003: 58).

What all the memoirs share is an emphasis on the geography, customs, and food of the villages concerned. The last of these, along with images of the bounty of the harvest, is given a prominent place in several narratives, thus forming a strong identity marker and a stark contrast to the starvation to which the community will soon be exposed in the camps. Food is often referenced in three languages—e.g., *madártej* (a frothy dessert made of milk, sugar, and eggs) is rendered in Hungarian, *sladoled* (ice cream) in Serbo-Croat, and various pastries, such as *Strudel*, in German—which indicates the hybridity of many Vojvodina communities in which Danube Swabians lived. Most people speak the languages of their neighbors at least to a degree, which

proves to be a definite boon during the years of internment and flight. Only Lang Owen gives an exact ethnic breakdown of her multiethnic village. In addition to Serbs, Hungarians, and Germans, the village is also populated by Slovaks and a few Jewish and Roma (Gypsy) families (Lang Owen 2003: 74).

In the descriptions of the geography of their communities, the narrators often remember the gardens of their childhoods as well as the trees, which include cherry, sour cherry, mulberry, acacia, and chestnut. The trees, along with the other plants, constitute a "sacred ground" (Lang Owen 2003: 15) and create a sense of belonging. Hoeger Flotz, during her flight to Germany, notices the chestnut trees along the streets of Ludwigsburg, trees that remind her of her home village of Gakowa, in the Bácska (Hoeger Flotz 2004: 88.) While it is certainly warranted to speak of the creation of an "imaginative geography" in these narratives in the definition of Edward Said,¹⁵ I would additionally argue with Khatharya Um that the memories of the places from which the narrators were forcefully removed speak of a "diasporic attachment [...] to a place that has been made into a 'home' by memories that are sensory, physical, topographical" (Um 2018: 331). In other words, the home that is lost beyond the possibility of return is given an almost physical memorial in the images the narrators preserve and choose to pass down to the next generations.

Transition to the War Followed by Deportation and Life in the Camps

The first transition from the quiet village life happens as a consequence of World War II, which brings complete upheaval and draws ethnic separation lines: "The war changed everything" (Lang Owen 2003: 91). Only Lang Owen makes any mention of what happens to the Jewish families in her village: they are taken away during the night and their property is subsequently auctioned off (Lang Owen 2003: 83). Adult men from the ethnic German community join the German armed forces. Lang Owen specifically references the formation of the Prinz Eugen division, whereas other narratives euphemistically refer to the male family members who joined the German armed forces as being "drafted." Not a single narrative allows for the possibility that the fathers, uncles, and so on of the young girls from whose perspective the stories are told may have joined voluntarily. Andor acknowledges that in her mother's village there were Nazi supporters and men who enlisted freely, but notes their numbers were apparently rather low. She does, however, concede that her grandfather and other men wore the Hitler moustache, and she adds: "[I]t horrifies me to think that they actually may have admired the man" (Andor 2007: 81).

The remainder of the community (mostly women, children, and the elderly) must suffer the horrible revenge of Tito's Partisans at the end of the war. The Partisans treat the Swabian

¹⁵ Said defines the creation of an "imaginative geography" in narratives as a way of constructing an image of the past by the writer who "remembers the past in his [her] own way, seeing images that to her or him [...] typify that past, preserving one past, sweeping away others" (Said 2002: 247–248).

civilians, who are reduced to *bare life* (Agamben), with sadistic cruelty. The loss of rights and property is accompanied by random shootings, torture, and rape, all of which are referenced in great, and at times gruesome, detail in each of the narratives. All the narrators describe this somber chapter in the life of the Danube Swabian community as a descent into darkness, cold, hunger, and suffering, very different from the sunny and happy images of childhood prior to the war. In stark contrast to her happy memories of her grandfather's garden and its colorful multitude of various trees, Lang Owen remembers what she lived through and witnessed in the camps, especially the notorious Rudolfsgnad (Knićanin) camp, in a "dense sepia tone, the color of old photographs," and as "an endless space in which there is nothing but emptiness" (Lang Owen 2003: 176). The previous sense of belonging comes to an abrupt end.

Infestations of lice and rodents bring illness to the people who are interned. Many die of typhus, dysentery, scarlet fever, or malaria. Starvation is another constant in the camps. Those who survive this ordeal are the lucky ones; some are able to find work in the kitchen, while others have relatives in America who, through the intervention of the Red Cross, eventually find out how their families are being treated and are able to send parcels that help them survive. The less fortunate die by the dozen. Hoeger Flotz estimates that 50-60 people died every day in the Gakowa camp alone (Hoeger Flotz 2004: 43).¹⁶ They are thrown into unmarked mass graves. All the narrators lose some family members in the camps: parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and so on. Children are sent out begging for food, as they are less likely to be severely punished by the guards who torture and shoot the adults they capture. But there are some kind people, too, who give food to the starving children. Some narratives mention the odd Serbian guard who is nice to the children, but most narratives speak of the guards as cruel and hateful. Herscha (Schmidt) calls the Partisans "bastard pigs" and "*schweinehunde*" (Herscha [Schmidt] 2007: 30, 39) for the way they treat the inmates of the Kruschevlje camp.

Rapes are referenced quite extensively in all the narratives, which I attribute to the fact that all the authors are women and that in some cases they personally witnessed the rapes as young girls. The raping of the women begins with the arrival of the Soviets in the Banat in October 1944 and subsequently continues when the Partisans move in and establish the camps. According to Wilms, "the women and young girls lived in constant fear of being violated" by the Soviets (Wilms 2013: 36). The women hide either in the attic or in suffocating holes. Women of all ages and ethnicities are raped by the Soviets, some in front of their families. Gang rape is also not uncommon; Lang Owen mentions her father's cousin who is raped by six Soviet soldiers. She is the only narrator that references a case of a "little Russian," no doubt a child conceived through

¹⁶ Rudolfsgnad (Knićanin) was the largest camp among numerous others. A total of 33,000 Danube Swabian civilians were held in this camp alone and 11,000 of them died. In 1946, about 46 percent of the captives were children under fourteen years of age (Arbeitskreis Dokumentation 1995: 107). Many other camps existed for the Danube Swabians in the Banat and the Bácska, but some also for the Germans in Croatia and in Slovenia.

sexual violence (Lang Owen 2003: 165). In the camps established by the Partisans, rapes become a daily occurrence. The most detailed and harrowing description of the rapes is given by Herscha (Schmidt). She witnesses two episodes of brutal rapes. The screams of the women along with the horrible images of violation and torture have a traumatic impact on the young girl, haunting her in nightmares. She narrowly escapes being raped herself by hiding in a barn with other children from the camp. She dedicates an entire chapter in her memoir to the rapes. The title of the chapter, "Against Their Will," may be connected intertextually to Susan Brownmiller's great feminist classic *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975). Rape is used by the guards either as a punitive action (as in the cases described by Herscha [Schmidt]) against young women who are caught leaving the camp trying to find food, or as a form of "entertainment" during their drunken revelries (Hoeger Flotz 2004: 23). Given the grim reality of the camps, it is hardly surprising that some inmates commit suicide while others contemplate it. Lang Owen even mentions that her mother wanted to jump into the well with her, her only daughter (Lang Owen 2003: 111). The author spent three years in the notorious Rudolfsgnad (Kničanin) death camp and notes how time or hope no longer existed: "We who have always been here have grown weary. Numb. Unaccustomed to hope, for us waiting is a reminder of something forgotten" (Lang Owen 2003: 223).

The gradual eradication of Danube Swabian culture and identity is poignantly expressed by Lang Owen in the following words: "The problem was not just that they did not want us to have or to be—they wanted us not to have been" (Lang Owen 2003: 115, emphasis in the original). The physical destruction of human life is accompanied by another genocidal policy; namely, the taking of children away from their grandparents or other relatives if the parents could not be found or identified. In most cases, the parents were taken away for forced labor and presumed unlikely to return by the Yugoslav authorities. Such children were considered orphans and were scattered into orphanages across the country. Lang Owen references a grandmother who walks into the river taking her grandchildren with her rather than letting them be taken away (Lang Owen 2003: 195). Andor relates in great detail how her two little cousins, brother and sister, were placed in separate orphanages so as to forget everything about their origins and identity, including their language (Andor 2007: 90-97). The only thing that was not taken from the children was their name. If they were lucky enough not to be adopted, their surviving parents or grandparents were sometimes able to find them after overcoming numerous administrative hurdles. Andor's cousins were claimed by their parents after several years of separation.

The Allies took no notice of the fate of these children (nor of the fate of the interned Danube Swabians) until 1948, when collaboration with the Yugoslav Red Cross was finally put in motion. In 1950, the first transports began to leave for Austria and Germany, where surviving family members of some of these children had been living in the meantime. These convoys lasted until 1959, and a total of 2,259 children were reunited with whoever was left of their families. Most of them were sent to Germany and Austria, but twelve of them went to the US and six came to Canada (Arbeitskreis Dokumentation 1995: 491). Andor quotes (without providing

any references, thus these numbers cannot be verified) the following numbers of children who were affected: 40,000 children were allegedly taken away, of whom 35,000 were placed in orphanages. She claims that 5,000 were killed (older children, ages 8–12, who were considered more difficult for adoption), another 5,000 were allegedly reunited with their families, and the remaining 30,000 were adopted by Serbian families (Andor 2007: 97). These numbers seem rather staggering and unconvincing, particularly in the light of the official statistics available regarding the total number of Danube Swabian victims.

Transition out of the Camps and into Exile

Several narratives speak of the same escape route via Hungary given that some of the camps were close to the re-established Hungarian border and people could walk over. This became particularly possible after 1947, when the guards became less vigilant, and the camps began to be gradually dissolved. Remaining hidden valuables were usually used to bribe the guards and procure a guide over the border. Some families stayed in Hungary for a while; for example, the family of Hoeger Flotz's future husband, which left Yugoslavia before the camps were established and lived in various Hungarian towns. In Baja, they worked for an ethnic German family, but when this family was stripped of their rights and property in 1946, they all had to leave Hungary and go to Austria (Hoeger Flotz 2004: 49). All the narrators speak positively of their reception in Hungary and mention the helpfulness of Hungarians toward the Danube Swabian refugees from Yugoslavia: "During the first days in Hungary, local ladies came with many outfits to give us. [...] We didn't care if they were new or used, it was a moment of enjoyment and gratitude. Finally, we felt human again (Herscha [Schmidt] 2007: 67). In retrospect, for the narrators, their stay in Hungary and treatment by the locals resonates with much more positive tones than the rather chilly welcome they would soon experience in Austria and Germany. As readers we can only speculate on the reasons for the warm welcome of the Yugoslav Danube Swabians by the local Hungarian population. One reason may lie in the fact that a fair number of Danube Swabians would have spoken at least some Hungarian given their interethnic communities back home and thus were able to communicate with the locals. Another reason may be that the Hungarians felt somewhat guilty regarding the expulsion of their own local Germans, which would already have been completed by the time most of the Yugoslav Danube Swabian refugees arrived in 1947–48.

Herscha (Schmidt) comments on feeling unwelcome everywhere after they leave Hungary: "[T]he Yugoslav Partisans stole our houses, Yugoslavia didn't want us back. We lost our nationality, we had no place to go, no passport, *and we didn't belong to any country in the whole world*" (Herscha (Schmidt) 2007: 69, emphasis added). The Austrians call them "Gypsies." The narrator comments on the cultural differences, even regarding the food in Austria as tasting differently from the hybrid dishes the Danube Swabians were accustomed to in Vojvodina; unlike the Austrians, they "used different seasoning," like paprika (Herscha [Schmidt] 2007: 74). The refugees are no more welcome in Germany than in Austria. Lang Owen reports that the first question they were asked by the German border guard was "Date of return?" (Lang Owen 2003:

172). In the refugee transit camp in Germany, twelve-year-old Luisa realizes "I am far from home" despite feeling safe and free of threats to their lives (Lang Owen 2003: 275–6). Several narrators describe their feelings of unease in the German schools, being not only refugees but also older than their classmates, as they had to miss several years of schooling while in the camps. Linguistic differences are another factor that sets the Danube Swabians apart in Germany given their dialect and lack of knowledge of High German.

Transition to a New country and a New Identity

Most of the narrators (or in Andor's case, the parents of the narrator) immigrated to America (in one case via Canada) in the 1950s following a temporary stay in Austria and/or Germany. They all placed great emphasis on their gratitude that America (or Canada) took them in and allowed them to live as free people again. America is a "new beginning" (Lang Owen 2003: 283), but it is not that easy to leave behind the burden of the past. As expressed by Herscha (Schmidt), the past kept following her in her nightmares: "Bad memories haunted me for decades after we walked to our freedom. On the few nights when I could actually sleep, I was tormented by constant nightmares. Other nights I suffered from insomnia and had flashbacks" (Herscha [Schmidt] 2007: 113).

Despite the veneer of a successful new life, the parents' generation burdens their children born in the new country with sometimes unrealistic attitudes rooted in their traumas of expulsion and exile. Andor sums up the life of her parents in the new country, America, with the following words: "They had come close to being eradicated; they had recreated themselves; they were lords of their manor once again. And their expectations ran high. The shadow they cast was sometimes too great to bear" (Andor 2007: 123). She addresses the plight of the postgeneration, the generation of children of survivors of a historical catastrophe, like her parents, who pass down not only their traumas but also their expectations in the new country to their children. Andor has a nervous breakdown in her first year of university, and she struggles for a long time with her guilt of being German before she is able to embrace her heritage. She quotes her brother as saying, "It's a wonder, Ing, that we didn't end up really screwed up" (Andor 2007: 157).

Several narratives address the difficulties of being an Other in America, which results in ethnic bonding within the Danube Swabian diaspora. Lang Owen struggles with the expectations of her environment to become someone else in America: "I carry my home with me like a cradle. Here among strangers, there is no feeling of belonging, no trace of the integrity of the village. Here I have no identity. Cut off from everything, unrelated, undefined, unintelligible to others, alone, I lose meaning" (Lang Owen 2003: 289). She begins to put on masks to fit in and acts like a typical American teenager. Her American relatives try to make her erase her past and her memories of what they see as a terrible childhood, but she refuses to comply: "It was my

childhood, the only one I had" (Lang Owen 2003: 293).¹⁷ Homesickness never quite leaves her or her parents. Her mother laments the fact that in America they are strangers, whereas at "home" they were somebody (Lang Owen 2003: 298). Lang Owen finds solace in her work as an art professor and, much later, in her grandchildren. Hoeger Flotz points out how, despite friendliness on the surface, she was never fully accepted among her high-school peers although they all wore the same uniform: "I feel my actions and German-accented words set me apart" (Hoeger Flotz 2004: 140). She remains of a different class from the other girls. Nobody ever invites her to their parties or to their home (Hoeger Flotz 2004: 144). The narratives thus illustrate the immigrant's status in the new country as *atopos* in Bourdieu's definition: "[T]he immigrant is *atopos*, has no place, and is displaced and unclassifiable. [...] Neither citizen nor foreigner, not truly on the side of the Same nor really on the side of the Other, he exists within that 'bastard' place, of which Plato also speaks, on the frontier between being and social nonbeing." (Bourdieu 2004).

The fact that all the narrators and their families became naturalized, and thus nominally American, did little to alter their social position and or their feelings of estrangement. Nostalgia, for the narrators, thus functions as a way of preserving identity. Memories of the lost homeland are "a salve against the ravages of exile. [...] [T]he past, edited and filtered, is not lost but inhabits the present and, in the process, makes the latter more habitable. [...] This lived tension between remembering and forgetting is part of the texture of diaspora's exilic condition" (Um 2018: 329). Danube Swabian identity lives on in the diaspora through the cultivation of this memory culture, while these narratives endeavor to preserve the stories of this Danube Swabian past and to resist the erasure of its history.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to raise some important reflections on memory-construction pertaining to ethnic German victimhood following World War II.

While speaking about genocide against the ethnic Germans of Yugoslavia seems quite justified based on the above and stating that what happened to the Danube Swabian population—particularly to the women, children, and the elderly—was horrible and amounts to a war crime, one should be cautious about applying a one-sided lens. Andor, for instance, draws parallels with the Holocaust, which is problematic. Furthermore, she always blames Hitler in her narrative—not Nazi Germany and its thousands of supporters in many countries, including Yugoslavia. The Danube Swabians are always framed as innocent. "Germans are, and were, Hitler's victims, too,"

¹⁷ This episode is reminiscent of Ruth Kluger's famous Holocaust memoir, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (1992), in which the author describes an identical experience with her American relatives who, upon her and her mother's arrival in the US, tell her to leave the past behind. Her reaction is like Lang Owen's. Kluger, too, considers that her past is the only one she has, no matter how good or bad it may have been.

she writes, and then goes on to claim that even the Nazi supporters became such "by fear and intimidation" (Andor 2007: 162). Meanwhile, she calls the Jews the "most popular victims of World War II" (Andor 2007: 11). Such statements run the danger of erasing the responsibility of any members of the German ethnic community for war crimes on the one hand, while engaging in memory competition (Rothberg 2009) on the other. Instead, a more balanced approach to creating memory about World War II is warranted here. Robert Moeller proposes a way of writing German history in the new millennium that would move beyond both memory competition and an attempt to establish a quid pro quo between German war crimes and German suffering:

Perhaps we can write a history of Germany in World War II which can better explain how killers—and colonizers and those who embraced racist policies, enthusiastically supported Hitler, and directly benefited from the pain and suffering that the Nazi state inflicted on others—became victims. Such a narrative of the war's end would not mask how the war began or avoid the causal relationship between Nazi brutality and the brutality of bombs and the Red Army [and, I would add, Tito's Partisans – A.S.]. *But it could reveal much about how people behave under extraordinary circumstances, seldom living their lives in terms of moral absolutes. And it would be a history that denied no victim the right to mourn while prohibiting any attempt to establish the moral equivalence of victims of Germans and German victims, or to explain German suffering as the quid pro quo for the suffering inflicted on others by Germans.* (177, emphasis added)

Moeller's lucid attempt to encourage a multidirectional approach to memorializing World War II would not create a false equivalence of German war crimes with German victimhood; nor would it deny any Germans who lost their loved ones and who still bear the childhood traumas of wartime violence decades later the opportunity to mourn and tell their story. The historian does not propose to establish a hierarchy of victimhood but rather to shed light on the past from several angles so as to better understand different interpretations of those events at the end of the war that continues to haunt the present. Such a more balanced approach would help neutralize memory competition and move toward a multidirectional memory (Rothberg 2009), one that would respect everybody's pain and loss while still not erasing the responsibility to honor the memory of the most hideous crimes of the twentieth-century—crimes committed in the name of a murderous regime with genocidal intent against millions of innocent people and a whole continent.

Only one of the narratives attempts to create a more multidirectional approach to memory concerning the war. Lang Owen raises the question of German wartime guilt. During the first station of her family's journey into freedom, in the Croatian town of Osijek (Eszék), she attends a history class where a former Partisan who was a spy during the war and had been captured by Germans visits the class to tell her story. Caught by the Germans, she was sexually assaulted and tortured, as a result of which she now walks on crutches. Lang Owen's initial reaction is one of denial: "At first, I listen in disbelief, wanting to deny the allegations. No! My father could not have done these things, I know. No German soldier I know would have done them, I think, defiant. It must be some mistake, propaganda, hate." But by the end of the Partisan survivor's story, Luisa's attitude changes and she comes to the realization that all parties involved in the

war were guilty of horrible violence against women and civilians: "Yes, I know, it is true! I was there. I have seen what they can do! Germans, Partisans, Fascists, Communists, Croats, Serbs, Russians" (Lang Owen 2003: 262).

Ultimately, the history of Danube Swabian identity in Hungary and Yugoslavia is viewed positively in all five narratives. Despite the changes that the interwar years brought to this identity, a sense of belonging to a homeland that had been established for over two hundred years remained stable, as affirmed by the mostly happy childhood memories from young women's perspectives and the creation of strong attachments to geographic placeholders. The brutality and thoroughness with which the Danube Swabian communities were destroyed, particularly in Yugoslavia, is well documented in all the narratives, which explains the subsequent formulation of nostalgic overtones when framing life in exile and diaspora as part of a transition toward a new identity. Finally, when speaking of Danube Swabian victimization, it is important to remember the mechanism of multidirectional memory, so as to allow every group that suffered genocide in World War II to tell its story without obliterating the historical causes and effects that ultimately led to such devastating consequences for the ethnic German communities as well. Bearing in mind the complex historical facts that lie behind the construction of a Danube Swabian memory culture, the narratives analyzed in this article contribute to the creation of a cultural memory of these people and assist in extricating their story from communicative memory's temporality.

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