

Inhospitable Land, Great Misery, Hard Work

Factual report about the deportation of a family from Deutschsanktmichael to the Bărăgan

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I was born in 1953 in Bărăgan, in the village of Salcîmi (now spelled Salcâmi), Ialomița District, Romania. My parents Maria Lech, née Gimpel (born 1924) and Stefan Lech (born 1917) had been deported there from Deutschsanktmichael (German St. Michael) together with my sister Hilde, who was five years older. I have no more memories of that time, but my mother, who died two and a half years ago, wrote down her experiences many years ago. These records, as well as my sister's memories, served as the basis for the following article. I have kept the first-person narrative form of my mother.

The deportation

It was June 18, 1951, and Hilde was two and a half years old. The day before, they had already said that no one was allowed to leave the village. Stefan called his workplace, the municipal administration of Romanian St. Michael, to ask if he should come to work. In a gruff voice he was told to stay where he was. Then he said to me: "You will see, we will be deported". I replied: "We are not rich and we have not done anything bad to anyone". Unfortunately, Stefan's prediction was confirmed. I woke up at four in the morning. And I still thought to myself, I had been right and we need not be afraid. Then the dog barked. Immediately afterwards there was a knock at the door. "Open up!" it said. A soldier stood there with a rifle in his hand and ordered us to line up next to each other while he read out our names. "Lech Hilde is still missing," he shouted. "Where is she?" he wanted to know. Stefan said, "There she is in her crib, sleeping." He was satisfied with that. The soldier told us that we had two hours to pack and then be ready to leave. I was headless and emotionally devastated. My parents, who lived in the house, as well as my parents-in-law and aunts came to help. They helped packing harvested potatoes from the garden and made flour. There was not much left. We were about to harvest. We didn't have much to take with us: a large bed, a table, the crib for Hilde, two stools, a high chair, cooking utensils and some household goods were all we had, along with clothes and bedding. Then a soldier crept up to Stefan and said, "I see you have a little child. Take your cow with you, that will help you. If you are gone, they will surely take your cow away from your father-in-law." So, we also took the cow and some chickens, as well as some food for the animals and buckets to water them.

Saying goodbye to my relatives was very difficult. We didn't know where we were going, when and if we would see each other again. Stefan was sick a lot and I was very afraid that he would not survive the whole thing and that I would have to survive alone in the distance who knows where with my little child.

A Romanian with a horse-drawn wagon drove up, we packed all our belongings on it, the cow was tied to the back of the wagon and then we went to the train station in the neighboring village of Romanian St. Michael, five kilometers away. There we met the two other affected German families from our village: the teacher Adam Waldner with his family and the widow Theresia Peter with her 21-year-old son Nikolaus and 19-year-old daughter Resi. Also deported with us were all the Macedonians who had been settled in Deutschsanktmichael only after the war. They, too, were "politically unreliable elements," as we were called, since we lived so close to the Romanian-Yugoslavian border. From the neighboring village of Romanian St. Michael, Romanians who had a distillery, innkeepers and rich farmers were also deported, from the next village Utvin a teacher and several (rich) farmers.

For three days we lay at the train station with our luggage and livestock, without anyone being allowed to visit us, without knowing when and where we were going. My father wanted to bring us something to eat. When one of the soldiers saw him, he threatened him with a rifle and forced him to turn back. After three days trains with cattle cars arrived and we were loaded together with all our belongings. The Waldner family had already been transported away the day before. We and the Peter family, thank God, got into one wagon and thus stayed together. They had also taken animals with them: two horses, a cow, a pig and chickens.

The journey was slow. When the train stopped, we had to get water and, if possible, some food for the animals. When we left Bucharest behind us, Stefan said, "Now we are rid of one worry. The direction the train is going now is not to Russia." This realization was a small relief to all of us.

The train kept going and we entered the eastern part of the Romanian Plain, a steppe landscape called Bărăgan. In Mărculești we had to get off the train. Romanians were already waiting at the station with their horse-drawn carts, onto which we loaded our things. The ride then continued to a new village, but it consisted only of isolated huts. We were speechless and wondered what this meant. Then three men from the authorities came and asked us to take a closer look at the clover field where we were. It was measured in rectangles and the corners were marked with stakes. From one stake to the next, 2500 square meters, that was our building site, we were told. We had to unload our belongings. Our new home was now in the open air.

The people who had been there for some time before us and who had already built these simple huts, came by and asked us where we came from and if we were thirsty. There was no well on site. Once a day, the water for the people and the animals was brought by a cistern. Containers were needed to store the precious commodity until the next day. We continued to join forces with the Peter family. First, we reassembled their horse-drawn wagon - it had been dismantled for the train trip - to tie the cows and horses to it. Then we made a shelter for our little Hilde, which our bed frame served for. The first night Stefan and I slept under the open sky. In the morning Stefan and Nikolaus Peter went out with the horse cart to look for useful bushes, straw and the like to build a hut. There was a forest, but further away from the village, and there were bushes planted in rows to keep out the wind and snow. There, poles could be cut down. Because these were not too long, a three-step deep rectangular pit was first dug to provide the necessary standing height. The poles were then used to form a kind of saddle roof, which was covered - as best it could be - with leaves and straw. So that the wind did not drive the "roof" away, I sealed it later above with loam. In front we left an opening as entrance free. A blanket served as a door.

We built this first hut somewhat larger, with room also for the Peter family, since Bäsl Res was a bit anxious with her two children. When the hut was ready, we put our things inside. Only there was no room for table and chairs, so we had to eat outside. A short time after we arrived, Stefan met an acquaintance from Triebswetter who asked him if he would like to go with him to the farm Jegălia, four kilometers away. Maybe they could find a job there. So, it happened that Stefan found employment as an administrator in the canteen of the state horse breeding farm. He covered the four kilometers daily by bicycle in summer and by foot in winter. At least a regular income was thus secured, and in the evening, he could buy a loaf of bread if necessary and bring it home with him.

House building

Soon the order came that everyone had to build his own house. The floor plan was predetermined by an engineer. In our house the room had an area of four-by-four meters, the kitchen was two by two meters, there was also a small open corridor. This was the type of house for three people. If there were four people, there was one more room. Our lot was on the corner of two streets yet to be built. The Peter family had been given the building lot on the opposite side of the street. So, we remained neighbors and could continue to help each other a lot. The other direct neighbors were also familiar to us. They were Romanians from Romanian St. Michael. They too had taken horses and wagons from home. We now joined forces with the Peter family and two other Romanian families to build the four houses together. Doors and windows as well as wood for the roof trusses were provided by the state. The walls were made of clay, because there was no other building material. Pounding was faster than first making mud bricks and then raising the walls, which was the usual way of building in the Banat. Behind the planned house, the soil was loosened and moistened. Short straw was added to the wet clay, as "reinforcement" to prevent cracks. Then a half-height wooden formwork was placed on both sides of the walls, filled with the clay mixture, and tamped down. The corners of the walls were connected with brushwood. The whole thing had to dry well so that the wall did not deform. During the drying phase, the other three houses were built. After the first part of the wall dried, the formwork was moved up for the second part of the wall.

This way, construction progressed slowly, also because the water for moistening the earth was brought with cisterns and the carts with their water containers queued up until they were in turn to be filled.

Stefan got barrels for cabbage from the farm where he worked. With these barrels, the Peter family and the two Romanian families brought water with their horse-drawn carts. A heavy downpour also helped. For the construction of the house, each family provided two people. However, since Stefan was at work, we used a day laborer from Grabatz in addition to my own work force. The houses were roofed with pipe, which we had to buy. A man from Grabatz had brought it to us and another one from Marienfeld covered the roof with it. Both were acquaintances of Stefan from the canteen.

In general, the summer of 1951 was hot and dry. During the construction of the house, we also built a separate hut for the Peter family. Now we had room for our table and chairs in our hut. Until autumn the new houses stood. On November 1, 1951 we moved in. The earth hut now served as a cowshed. We were glad to finally have a house, since the nights were already quite cool and one had to think of the approaching winter.

In front of our house there was a single large acacia tree on the road. Otherwise, there were only bushes to be seen. And our village was named after this tree: Salcîmi (salcîm means acacia). I taught my three-year-old daughter Hilde that no matter where she was playing in the village, she should look for the big acacia tree for orientation so that she would not get lost. That is where we are now at home. Some of our fellow sufferers could not believe what was happening to them. They refused to build houses. And they were going to have a very hard time surviving the next winter.

Life in the Bărăgan

In our papers there was a D.O. (Domiciliu Obligatoriu, meaning compulsory domicile) was noted. With this, we were allowed to move only within a radius of 15 km. It was also forbidden for anyone to visit us. Stefan's sister was one of the first who dared to come to us. She stayed for a few days. Stefan had told this to the militia staff which he knew from his workplace beforehand, and they turned a blind eye.

The inhabitants of the surrounding villages met us with great suspicion at first. They had been told that we were criminals. Later the mistrust subsided.

In the Bărăgan, the summers are very hot. The ground was covered with dust. You could hardly walk barefoot on it because the dust was so hot. In the summer it also rained little and due to the great heat droughts occurred frequently. Winters, however, were so frosty that they often endangered the winter seed. At times the fierce wind, called Crivăţ, caused hurricane-like snowstorms with snowdrifts. After our house was finally finished and we had already moved in, it turned out during a rain that the roof was not completely tight. A lucky circumstance came to our rescue. We were able to buy the old reed from a broken-down horse stable from the farm where Stefan was working. Stefan paid two more people to help him bundle the reed and cover our house with it as well.

Now we had to get everything for the winter. We also had to get leaves and hay for the cow. Because it had hardly rained in summer, the leaves were so small and weak that the cow even ate the stalks. We also bought a small stove for the kitchen and wood for heating. And we were able to buy a small, 80 to 90 kg pig for slaughter. The basic food such as bread, milk, sugar, flour and oil were rationed.

In the first winter (1951/1952) our Lord God was with us. It was a very mild winter, which was not usual in this area. In the following spring, life almost took its normal course. Everyone who could, looked for work. In addition, a community center, a school, a cultural center, a police station, and an infirmary had to be built by the residents. This was done without payment.

People were assigned to these works on a daily base. Similarly, some fountains wells were dug and equipped with rotary crank chain and buckets. Water was only encountered at a depth of 36 meters. Now it was no longer necessary to fight for every drop of water at the cistern. We completed our house with a shed for the cow, as well as a pigsty and a chicken coop with a chicken yard. Now the animals were also taken care of. As I was used to in the Banat, I worked the garden as well as two leased free house spaces and I bred fattening pigs, of which we sold one or two in the fall to earn additional money in this way.

The second winter (1952/1953) was already harder. It was much colder and there was a stormy wind. Now it was also very hard for Stefan to make the way to the farm every day. As of Mondays, he worked full day and on Sunday until noon. Once it was said that wolves had come across the frozen river. So, Stefan took an axe in his backpack to be able to defend himself against the wolves. Thank God it never came to such a situation.

On August 15, 1953 Marie was born. She was a wish child, Hilde too was overjoyed with her little sister. She took care of her when I was out running errands, fetching water or working in the garden. By the time our daughter was born, the rules had softened a bit. We were still not allowed to leave, but visitors were allowed to come. With it, both grandmothers came to help.

Medical care in the village worked quite well. We had a very good elderly Jewish doctor and several midwives. Of course, there was no priest and no church. When our Marie was nine months old, a Hungarian Catholic itinerant priest unexpectedly came to the village one Sunday. He held a mass in front of the school, baptized the new born children, performed weddings and blessed the graves. So, it happened that Marie was baptized at the age of nine months, in the open air, sitting on my arm, and by her sister Hilde and our dear neighbor Resi Peter. Unfortunately, Stefan could not be there, because everything came very short term and surprisingly. Nevertheless, we were very happy about the baptism.

The third winter (1953/1954) was again very hard with quite heavy snow storms. The Crivăț chased with up to 150 kilometers per hour over the open steppe and it came to meters high snow drifts. So much snow fell that every half hour, day and night, if the front door opened to the outside you had to climb through the window and shovel the entrance to the house clear. And for space reasons, the door opened to the outside in our house, too. The people who did not do that at night were all snowed in by morning and had to wait for one of their neighbors to shovel them free. On the side where the kitchen window was, our house was also completely snowed in from top to bottom. And because we had the cow barn behind the house, we had to shovel a tunnel through the solid snow to get to the cow. On stormy days like that, you could not get water from the fountain. When you went outside, you had to cover your mouth and nose so that the wind would not cut off your breath. The eyelashes froze together. You had to thaw them with your fingers to be able to see again. We had taken precautions and stored in time water inside in barrels for us and the animals.

Stefan had always gone to work, even in bad weather, but once the snowstorm was so severe that he had to stay home. We decided to make ourselves comfortable. I started cooking, it was quite warm in the living room. Suddenly something came down from the ceiling. What had happened? Because the lower layer of pipes on our roof was crooked and not tight, the wind had blown snow all the way to the top of the attic. Due to the warmth in the living room, the snow in the attic began to melt and softened the ceiling plaster made of clay, which now began to fall. At this sight we lost our appetite and the coziness was over. We immediately extinguished the fire in the economizer stove and opened the window to provide cooling. We covered the stroller and the crib to prevent Marie and Hilde from getting something.

I pondered during the night what we could do to improve the situation. In the morning, I had a plan for how the house could be extended and rebuilt, with a porch as well as a front door that opened inward so we wouldn't always have to climb out through the window during such an extreme snowstorm. As soon as the weather allowed it in the spring, I started making clay bricks. It was tedious work because I had to bring in all the water. Once again, a fortunate circumstance came to our aid. We were able to buy bricks from a demolished barn, and a carpenter from Grabatz made two smaller windows and two doors. With that there our extension ready quickly. On the street side up to the driveway we laid out a flower garden. For the fence, wires were stretched in three rows, into which corn stalks were woven. The flowers comforted me a little against the overall misery.

In 1954, the Romanian mayor had a deep well with motor dug in the center of the village, so that the inhabitants now had good and sufficient water. Then he left the village. He said he was now going back to his hometown of Constanta because he could no longer stand it hearing old people and little children crying. Time passed and, in the fall of 1955, Hilde had to go to school. There was only one Romanian school in the village. At first it was very difficult for her because she could speak very little Romanian. I always accompanied her on her way to school and when the

winter storms began, I tied a scarf over her head so that she could only see little and led her by the hand.

We survived the last winter of 1955/1956 well. By decree of December 20, 1955, we were officially freed. We received new identity cards without the D.O. note and were allowed to return to the old homeland. It was not one free trip, because everyone had to pay own expenses. This time we packed our things with joy. After all, it was back to our beloved Deutschsanktmichael, to our relatives and friends. The Peter family left home right after received their discharge papers. The friendship with the family, which deepened during the deportation, has lasted a lifetime. We have always felt connected.

Stefan and I decided to take the hard-earned work with us. Stefan's sister came to take in advance by train the children back to Banat. Marie was two and a half years old. The same age as Hilde when we were deported. And my father came to help us packing and loading into the wagons. We ordered two wagons, one for us and the livestock (a cow, cattle, pigs, chickens, and a cat), a second for the grain. We wanted to take that with us, since that year brought a bad harvest in Banat. We were not allowed to sell the house, but we left it to a Macedonian who, in gratitude, took us with our belongings to the train station. I stayed at home with the animals until the end, and when I left with the Macedonian, our dog Hector suddenly howled as if he wanted to shout, "Don't leave me here!" I almost forgot about him. But I quickly ran back and took him with me.

My father left by passenger train, Stefan and I brought the two wagons slowly by freight train to Romanian St. Michael. On March 30, 1956, we happily arrived in Deutschsanktmichael. Now, for the third time since our marriage, we had to start all over again.

Final remark

The village of Salcâmi has not existed for a long time. There is only a water tower left, as I was told by someone who was also born there. The rest has been reclaimed by nature. I find it admirable how my parents have managed to bring two children through all the misery and hard work in good health. Mutual love, tenacity, and diligence and finally a lot of trust in God must have helped. I cannot consciously remember any deprivation. Of course, my parents' health suffered greatly. My mother had her first cardiac arrhythmia in the Bărăgan. The Federal Republic of Germany's belated recognition in 2016 of the suffering and difficult fate suffered by German forced laborers brought a quiet smile to my mother's face. My father passed away in 2011 and did not live to see this.

Notes of the HOG Deutschsanktmichael

In 1951, the mayor's office of the municipality of Romanian St. Michael, to which Deutschsanktmichael belongs, decided to deport all the forty or so families of Macedonians who had been forcibly relocated in 1947 from Dobruja to Deutschsanktmichael at that stage to the Bărăgan. Probably for this reason, only three German families were deported from our village. The deportation of the family of our former honorary chairman Nikolaus Peter together with his mother Theresia Peter, née Arenz and his sister Theresia was extremely inhumane, because the father Josef Peter had already died in 1937. And what happened to the Lech family after their return home? Both daughters completed their studies in Timisoara. Hilde studied mathematics at the university there and later physics in Munich. She decided to pursue a teaching career. Maria Margareta studied architecture at the Polytechnic Institute and became an architect. The Lech couple was able to emigrate with daughter Hilde in 1976. Daughter Maria Margareta followed with her husband in 1978. Like her parents, she found a new home in Augsburg. Hilde lives with family in Mammendorf in the district of Fürstenfeldbruck.

Nikolaus Heber

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