

Visiting the Banat

In the spring of 2001 my aunt, my cousin and his wife and I made our first trip to the Banat in Romania as descendants of our German ancestors. Through genealogy and the assistance of family members we discovered on the internet, we learned that our original Donauschwaben ancestors were from the village of Dourd'hal in Lorraine. They came to the Banat in the late 1700's and settled in the village of Schöndorf and from there a century later our great-grandparents, John and Theresa Bermel and their 3 children, emigrated to America. It has been an enlightening experience to trace our surprisingly historic roots. It was a story of pioneering ancestors who endured and lived to settle in a country now strange to us but somehow deeply in our hearts. It was our desire to see our grandmother's village of Schöndorf and the fascinating history of the German settlements in the Banat that inspired us to make that first trip. More about that trip can be found at this link: http://www.rootsweb.com/%7Ehuncscho/html/the_bells.html

In October 2005, we made a return trip to the Banat. This time we were accompanied by our cousin and good friend Erwin Kilzheimer whom we also discovered through genealogy and was originally from the village of Glogowatz. Erwin spoke German and Romanian and was a terrific guide. He pointed out interesting historical sights and provided much cultural background information that helped us better understand the country and the people. He was an indispensable translator and introduced us to friends in Glogowatz. He knew how and where to meet trains, trolleys and buses. His presence was inspiring because he had grown up in Glogowatz and he helped us to understand his attitudes and feelings for this village. It was interesting to explore yet another formerly German settlement besides Schöndorf with a relative who knew it from childhood. Here then is a short overview of our 2005 trip back to the Banat.

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We met our cousin Erwin in Stuttgart, Germany where we spent a few days sightseeing. Of special interest to us were the marvelous Hollenzollern castles. Both of which were connected historically to Romanian royalty. While part of a different period of history, they also represented a great cultural contrast to the Romania of today. It was a nice introduction to the beginning of our trip to Romania. Next we flew on Carpathian Airlines to the city of Timisoara, Romania, where we stayed at a Best Western that was frozen in time around 1950. It was very clean with an excellent breakfast and gracious hosts. We explored the city that evening and admired the architecture of the beautiful old buildings, many with a distinct Byzantine influence. Parts of the city were somewhat rundown and many of the old buildings suffered from neglect. We were sad to see many in need of paint and repair. We walked through the park along the river and visited the landmark Orthodox Cathedral. We visited several city squares where we also attended a mass at the Catholic Cathedral. We dined at a very nice restaurant on familiar old family dishes like beef with dill sauce. Meals like these were hearty and reminiscent of our Banat heritage. Timisoara appeared to us a busy and emerging city with many architectural treasures that give it a special character and appeal to visitors. From Timisoara we traveled by taxicab to the city of Arad. We crossed the flat Banat countryside of farm fields, many of which were in cultivation. The road was a two lane highway in good condition. Cars traveled at about 55 mph and the traffic was light until we reached the outskirts of Arad. We found that this city we had visited only four years ago seemed to have undergone a subtle change for the better. As in Timisoara much is in need of repair and preservation but it was apparent that things had improved since our last visit. We noted new stores and restaurants and our Continental Hotel had been completely renovated since 2001. This was a dramatically different hotel from the one we stayed at four years before. Luxurious and totally redesigned, the lobby and entire first floor presented a beautiful interior. Our rooms also were redecorated and very comfortable. Even the McDonald's restaurant across from the hotel was bright, cheerful and up to date. However, the fantastically designed roof and upper stories of its beautiful building were still in very poor condition. We noted in the Eastern European architecture of both Timisoara and Arad much of the charm lies in the beautiful decorative rooflines. Yet, like this one, many are left to deteriorate while improvements go on at street level.

On our tour of Arad we found the city bustling with people and activity. While many of the buildings are in sad disrepair like the huge railroad station, some like the city hall and the Catholic cathedral looked very nice. There were also beautiful monuments, statues and churches as well as a quiet walkway along the Marosch River. While there are strong contrasts between the old and the new to be seen in Arad, we hoped that its architectural treasures will eventually be preserved. We walked through the city to a bus stop where we boarded a bus for my grandmother's village of Schöndorf. As we traveled out of Arad we noted that a few new homes were going up just outside of the city, so a suburb was beginning to develop. Upon reaching the village it was clear that no dramatic changes had occurred there. We were warmly received by Erwin's Aunt Katherina and Anna and Michael Mayer at their homes. We were treated to baked goods from the store and beer and homemade Schnapps. It was such a happy visit to find all our friends well and glad to see us again. With Erwin's assistance we were able to locate and visit my grandmother's former house. In Romanian he asked the present owner for permission to enter the courtyard. It was a thrill to finally see that the home we had heard so much about hadn't changed drastically in the 100 years since our grandmother left for America as a 12 year old girl. It was a touching experience to walk on the ground where she must have played as a child. Most of the village houses looked the same to us as they had 4 years before but like my

grandmother's house a few had been painted and improved a bit. The Catholic church still needs paint, the roads are still mostly dirt but it was comforting to know such a small village has struggled on for over 200 years.

The next day we took a train from Arad to the village of Maria Radna where the Shrine and Basilica of Maria Rada sits on the side of a hill overlooking the valley of the Marosch River. Along the way we saw the countryside of farms and villages. In the backyards of homes stood hayricks and pens for animals. It was a very peaceful and quiet countryside without many roads or traffic. Although the land was flat and the horizon sometimes endless, we began to see the foothills of mountains in the distance. The Shrine of Maria Radna on a hillside presented a very dramatic sight however there was a contrast between the deterioration of its exterior and the exquisite interior of the church. Inside we saw a cleaning crew of women sweeping the floor and caring for the altar cloths. We could see that it had been a showplace and this was another stage of its history of decline and restoration, including a fire in which the only surviving thing was a portrait of the Madonna that escaped the flames. Considered miraculous, this picture now rests in a glorious gold frame above the altar. Most interesting was a hallway whose walls were covered with handpainted pictures attesting to personal events considered miracles in people's lives attributed to the Blessed Virgin. The shrine was an enormous complex and a place of pilgrimage for Catholics from the surrounding countryside. In his youth my grandmother's brother brought her a beautiful medal from Maria Radna that now belongs to my aunt. She wore it on our visit to this venerable place. On the hillside in back of the building are the stations of the cross and statues of various saints along a path that leads up many steps to another small altar in the woods. It was a lovely view from there of the village and the river valley. We saw little activity in the village when we stopped for coffee at a rustic cantina across from the shrine. From there we watched the horse carts go by carrying loads of lumber and dry cornstalks. There is a great difference in mode of life between the villages and the cities we saw in Romania. City life seemed to be very much like city life everywhere but in the countryside the villages live at a slower pace. Economic change has been slow to come to these villages and it appears that one would need the income of a job in the city to afford to greatly improve a village home. An interesting sight on the road through Maria Radna was a motorcycle with a huge bunch of carrots tied to the seat, an interesting contrast between the modern and rural ways of life.

From Maria Radna we traveled by local train to the village of Glogowatz, Erwin's childhood home. The train let us off at the Glogowatz train station and we walked a mile or two down a dirt road from the small railroad station building to the village. Glogowatz is a much larger village than those we had seen before. It had more streets and homes and the main street had more stores and businesses. Here again we encountered a contrast between the past and the present as horse carts and automobiles both used the streets. We walked through the neighborhoods where the houses and their courtyards appeared in the original style although here as in Schöndorf, we learned that not many German people remain. Erwin took us to visit his old neighbors, a wonderful family in a beautifully cared for home with indoor plumbing. Here again we were treated with great hospitality and many refreshments, even extra slippers for us to wear! As we continued our walk through Glogowatz Erwin saw some old friends who greeted us kindly and were happy to meet us. Along the way we saw a large brand new house and wondered who could have built it. Eventually we came to Erwin's former school which was large and in good condition. The Catholic church nearby looked very well maintained. The interior of the church was especially beautiful and we even met the priest on his way to the church. His name is Franz Pettla, born 1914 in Bakowa. He has been the priest in Glogowatz since October 1st, 1963. Erwin introduced us to this elderly and gracious man whom we will not soon forget. Oddly, just behind the church were the remains of rock walls that were crumbling from age. We learned that they were ancient ruins which have not restored or preserved and someone's chickens were enjoying the historical site. These ruins of an older civilization were a reminder to us that history creates new cities over old settlements layer by layer. Unlike its ancient ruins, the history of Glogowatz is being recorded for our descendants, as in Erwin's Glogowatz genealogies and on a wonderful CD about Glogowatz available on the Glogowatz website at this link: <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~banatdata/Glogowatz/HomePage.htm>

Our return trip to Romania was a great success. We loved both our visits to this friendly country, especially this one in the company of Erwin. We have great hopes for Romania's future prosperity and for the preservation of its unique architecture and the history of its varied population. As descendants of our Donauschwaben ancestors we are proud of our heritage and would greatly recommend such a trip as this to anyone whose roots, like ours are in the Banat.

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