

BIOGRAPHY OF A GLOGOWATZER
Summarized and quoted by Hans Gehl from an account

The Banater *Josef Walitschek* is 78 years old today and has gone through a lot that he certainly would have wished different. Of course now in Germany, he has the leisure to bring to his mind's eye once more all the events of his life and to record those which seem important to him for his descendants and for all those interested. In the process, a life history came out on 60 closely-written pages which contain many personal experiences. Many events of the wartime, however, reflect the village history and others the deportation to Russia with events as they were similarly experienced by many affected Banater compatriots and kept in memory. Therefore, they should be passed on here.

As an Adolescent Farmer

The Josef Walitschek, born in 1927 in the Banater greater Glogowatz community (today Vladimirescu, Arad District) on the Frankengasse (Straße Republicii 17, old village house number 150), has written an extensive biography in an understandable and precise style. That he was capable of that, his statement that he attended seven grades and five times was the best in the class and twice the second best pupil in his grade confirms. It is not clear to him why he had to take the examinations for the 7th grade in the Romanian neighboring community Mândruloc.¹ His year of birth, 1927, furnishes an explanation. The author finished the 7th grade in 1942 and it is known that between 1942 and 1945 the denominational schools were taken over by the ethnic group and the leaving classes could only be tested at state schools. In the school year 1944-45, no lessons were given at all because of the passage of the front through. I, myself, went into the first grade in September 1945. At that time, we were 75 children just starting school in two years' classes at the Glogowatz elementary school. In September 1945, the denominational school was able to be opened again and the lessons begin with the German teachers.

After the end of school, Josef had to help in the homestead or else completely replace his father when he once again had been called up by the Romanian military to perform work: One built railroad lines around Ineu² in the west Carpathian Mountains and the people liable for military service always had to help several months and were home during the important agricultural tasks and during the harvest. About that, the author wrote:

At this time, it was very hard to be a farmer because there had to be working from early in the morning until late in the evening. With a great deal of work, a good harvest was brought in at autumn, but then it was difficult to sell the harvest like wine, wheat, corn and potatoes. The dealers haggled and only paid a ridiculously low price in the end. (...) We gladly watched the grown-ups during the work and saw ourselves down with them a little. The ripe rye had to be beaten out by hand and the

¹ Mondorlak, 5 miles ESE of Glogowatz

² 30 miles NE of Arad

material for the production of the sheaf ropes prepared. During the harvest, the wheat, barley and oats sheaves were tied together with the ropes. When the rye was beaten out, there was refuse in which there were still full ears. One made a big heap which was trod by horses in order to get the rye seeds out of the ears. After that, the straw was thrown up with the pitchfork so that the seeds were separated from the straw. We thus watched how the parents and grandparents did that with the pitchfork and wanted to imitate it. I no longer know how it happened: we threw the straw around with the pitchfork and all of a sudden I hit my cousin Kathi. I wounded her above the eyebrows with the hayfork but fortunately nothing bad happened.

The household went all right. We had two broodmares and every year there were two foals. Sometimes we had five horses in the stable but there were also times when aside from the two brood mares no horse at all was in the stable. When the war was rampant, the horses were also confiscated. Over winter they were brought back if they were still alive. If not, only a poor price was paid for them. Over winter the horses were brought to strength and then confiscated again. So it happened that in summer 1943 we no longer had any workhorse at all because four horses had been confiscated. We then bought one in a Romanian village because the people there had to hand over almost none at all.

At this time there already were tractors which made plowing easier. In the years 1942-44, we had a lot of blue and red clover on the fields which gave hay for the horses and cows. The second hay harvest was left for the seeds. From the seeds, oil was produced and that was paid for very well.

The reaping made a great deal of work but in time it was made easier by machines. At this time, that was almost exclusively my work; I was still young of course and did the work gladly and with a lot of pleasure. Whenever the parents traveled with the farm worker, the day-laborer and with two horses to the vineyards towards Schiria (Wilagisch)³ I remained at home and worked with the horses which were still there. From the year 1943, we grew sugar beets. Because of that, the men were released from the military and father also was no longer called up.

The War Also Came to Us

The author experienced the events of the war as a young person and describes a few high points from this eventful time.

In the year 1943, it was forbidden to celebrate the Kermis festival. Celebrating was no longer allowed at all because there was war and great misery in the communities. But the greatest misery was one already knew that the boys and men would be drafted into the German armed forces. Because of that, already boys and men were discharged from the Romanian army so that afterwards they are drafted into the German armed forces. Beforehand, many young people came together in the village and founded large comradeships out of eight to ten age groups. We were ten comrades at our age [16 years] and the youngest in this circle of comradeships of 40-50 persons. Since it was not allowed otherwise, we celebrated the Kermis festival (on the 16th of May, patron saint of the church Johann from Nepomuk) at the edge of the

³ Şiria, 14 miles NE of Glogowatz

village in the open air and in a house where there was a lot of space. Tables were put together in the yard and everyone brought along something to eat and drink from home. For us younger people, it was great to be allowed to be with the older ones.

Unfortunately, we also knew that this would only be of short duration because many reported for duty. On the 4th of July 1943, the ethnic Germans from Romania liable for military service were drafted into the German armed forces. From Glogowatz, there were 504 men who were born between 1908 and 1926.⁴ Of those born in 1926 only those who had birthdays in January, February and March were drafted. I was only born on the 16th of March 1927, a stroke of luck at this time. In the case of the men drafted, 162 were killed in action and 28 missing. A few were also still with the Romanian military. Exactly how many they were, I no longer can say. To be sure, among the Romanian military 107 Glogowatzer men were killed in action; that amounts to 269 soldiers killed in action altogether in the Second World War for the community. Left behind is a lot of suffering and pain.

Because of the bombing of the cities, the Romanian soldiers in training were transferred to the surrounding villages in September 1943. Since Glogowatz had a good transportation link to Arad, Romanian recruits were also transferred to Glogowatz and put up in every house with several rooms. A room with us also had to be evacuated and was occupied by soldiers. Now a ban on going out ruled as of 9 o'clock in the evening. Therefore, we boys already went out before 9 o'clock and then snuck home via gardens and yards and over fences.

Once, I was reaping in the vicinity of the Arader Hotter (village boundary) with our reaper. Then I heard the howling of sirens for the air-raid alarm from the city and already after a few minutes the drone of airplanes in high-altitude flight could be heard. All of a sudden, cracking and flashing began. I had great anxiety about the horses because it was not easy to calm them in such situations. The noise was extremely loud and came from nearby. It happened on the 3rd of June 1944 when the Arader railroad station, the freight car factory and the barracks next to the station were destroyed during the bombing.

Then came the 23rd of August 1944, a difficult day on which the Romanians turned against Germany. The life of suffering began at that time for the Banater Swabians.

On the 13th of September we were in the vicinity of the Marosch dyke during the potato harvest. All of a sudden, we heard the thunder of cannons from the mountains and soon after that the first refugees already came on the Marosch dyke towards Arad. Father was once again home from the military and took the potatoes into the village. The harvest was good and had to go several times. On the third time, he no longer came back. Because of that, the farmhand and I went home. We saw that the Hungarian military had marched into the village and learned that father was taken with by the Romanian military for the escape. Later, he came back with horse and wagon, actually two horses were lost. More and more Hungarian military followed later, but after 20 km⁵ (at the west Carpathian Mountains) the Hungarians met with resistance of the Romanian military and the Russian advance guard. During the retreat, the Hungarians took our two brood horses along and we had to bottle-feed the

⁴ 17-35 years old

⁵ 12 miles

foal left behind. The Russian and Romanian military moved closer and closer and occupied our village on the 22nd of September 1944.

When the front rolled over us, all of us had hidden in the cellar and bolted the doors. Once, I heard two Russians shouting in the stable, whereupon two shots were fired. We still had a still not broken-in brown gelding in the stable. They intimidated it and took it with in place of the small, emaciated horse. Thus, only the small Russian horse and the foal were left to us. With a small wagon put together by hand, we were able to fetch the bare necessities from the field, which looked a mess. It's true no more dead people but all kinds of war material lay around on the fields. The war had left its traces and many things were still bound to follow.

Deported to Russia with the Youngest

After the front had moved on toward Hungary, the boys born in the years 1926 and 1927—only seventeen years old—together with the old men were seized and brought to Bucharest in a guarded concentration camp. In the plank beds of the wooden barracks, they made acquaintance of the bloodthirsty bugs for the first time. Josef, along with three other Glogowatzer guys, risked the escape. In the night, they crawled through the loose barbed-wire, snuck onto a freight train and traveled to Pitești,⁶ and then on the roof of a freight car to Temeswar. In the cloister, they were fed and received tickets to Neuarad;⁷ the railroad bridge over the Marosch was flattened by bombs. The guys bribed the sentry on the passenger bridge, reached the Marosch dyke towards Glogowatz and hid. They were reported by compatriots who escaped later, gave themselves up to the police and had to transport milk to the Arader fortress as punishment. The remaining prisoners only came back from the Bucharest camp in December, shortly before the new deportation. Russian military was still in the village.

1. An Endless Journey into the Unknown

On a Sunday, the 14th of January 1945, people stood in the street quite early. We knew right then that something must have happened. The village was surrounded by the military and nobody was allowed out. German men and boys from 17 to 45 years and women from 18 to 30 years were hunted, grabbed and taken along by the military.

In the war years, every single house had hiding-places and hideouts, there were also empty barrels into which we put wheat, corn, oats and barley and hid under the hay in the barn, which was full of hay. And when one heard that the Russians were coming, the wine was also hidden.

I also was hunted and had to find a hiding-place quickly. But all the hideouts were already filled with barrels. Since I was the only person sought in our house, we quickly found a hiding-place in the Strohrtriste (straw heap) in the backyard; it was

⁶ 70 miles NW of Bucharest

⁷ On the south bank of the Marosch, now part of Arad

approximately five meters⁸ wide and seven meters⁹ high. The entrance to my hiding-place was on the side of the neighboring fence. There, I worked myself in and created a space for me where I could even stand. The straw, I put into the crevice for the straw heap newly-placed for it. With help of my grandfather, I quickly brought blankets, bread, sausage, water some grapes, a flashlight and something to read into the hole. The straw was only lightly pressed from outside so that I was still able to get air. Of course, I did not get around to reading because my thoughts were always somewhere else. (...)

On the next day, mother came and asked me whether I still could stand it. I just had to endure it even if it was hard. Grandfather had a plot of land on the Hotter (boundary) of Micălaca.¹⁰ An older field neighbor was willing to take me in with himself so that I did not have to go to Russia. I gave my agreement to that and came out of my hiding-place. The Romanian had brought along a Romanian coat, cap and boots for me; for appearances, we also hung two sacks over the shoulders in order not to stand out. For the most part, the Romanians were seen like that, therefore we did not stand out and arrived well in the house of the Romanian. Since I was quite often there with grandfather and father and knew the whole family, I was received kindly. We soon went to sleep.

On Tuesday morning after the meal, I experienced a nasty surprise: I was supposed to marry the sole, only fifteen years old daughter of the family so that I will not have to go to Russia. I found the plan insidious and was very dejected. The family left me alone and I only came out of my room at the mealtimes. On Wednesday morning, mother came to me in the room. We spoke about everything possible, only not about the marriage. On the next day, grandfather came weeping and said that one wanted to catch me. But since one found me nowhere, one simply took my mother with.

The mother was able to escape with help of a sympathetic sentry it is true, but when all the people sought were already selected and when it was circulated that one would simply set on fire the house of the person whom one was not able to find, the still not quite 18 years old Josef gave himself up on the 18th of January 1945, packed his suitcase and a sack, took along coat and blanket and was taken to the collecting point, a barracks in Kleinsanktnikolaus¹¹ on a military auto. After ten days, the livestock cars with the prisoners rolled off to the Russian work camps.

We traveled again on the railroad line on which he had come two months ago, but this time it was no passenger train but a train made of livestock cars into which 40-50 people were crammed by locked doors. We got air only through four small windows which were closed from outside with wire netting. Next to a door was a hole in the floor; there, one was able to make “das Große” and “das Kleine.”¹² The cars were

⁸ 16 feet

⁹ 23 feet

¹⁰ 2.7 miles WNW of Glogowatz, now part of Arad

¹¹ Sinnicolau Mic, 3.4 miles SW of Glogowatz, now part of Arad

¹² Poop and tinkle in baby talk

fitted out with plank beds. In the middle, along the doors, we had a little space, so we were able to get a bit of exercise.

Thus we came via Temeswar to Lugosch¹³ where we stopped a little longer for the first time. The doors were opened and we felt the cold winter air. That meant that we would be allowed to fetch water for ourselves. We took our containers and went—four-five guys from every car—with the guards over several tracks to the watering point and stood in line there. Suddenly, shouts went through the station, but at this time we still were not able to understand the language of the guards. They said, “Dawei, dawei, bistro,”¹⁴ therefore “forward, quickly.” The train was supposed to travel on again, but everybody still wanted to fill his water container quickly. The guards started to curse and still shouted, “Dawei, dawei!” So we were forced to return and a few were left without water. The tracks were no longer clear, a passenger train and a freight train stood there, around which we had to go. Confusion arose; the guards had lost track and because of that shouted louder and louder. When we were finally in the cars, the train soon set off as well. I wonder whether a few have not cleared out on this occasion. It well would have been possible to escape at that time.

During the journey, for the most part we knew approximately where we were because someone always perched at the window. We traveled via Turnu Severin¹⁵ where we stood for days on the siding, then via Craiova¹⁶ to Pitești¹⁷ but we did not know the destination of the journey. After that, we traveled in the northeast direction to Moldavia. After six or eight days, it finally meant get off but only for the men; the women remained on the train. So, father and children, siblings, relatives and friends were separated. Whether married couples were also separated like that, I cannot say. Other cars were not opened and were able to travel on. In Jassy,¹⁸ we were allowed to get off and were put up in a nice university building. Here, the people came together, Swabians from the Banat, from Hungary and Sathmar,¹⁹ Zipser,²⁰ Saxons from Transylvania. People from Bessarabia and from Bukovina still spoke German; a few also had German names but were able to speak no German. One saw that not only men of ages 17-45 years and women of ages 18-30 years were deported but also younger and older people. Then I saw a small and thin boy standing in the corner. We got into a conversation and he said that he was born in 1929, therefore only 15 years old. He was called Matz (actually Martin), came from Matscha²¹ and we later became good comrades.

How long we were in Jassy, I no longer can say. But one day, we were taken over the border to Ungheni.²² Before the war, Ungheni, like all of Bessarabia up to the Dniester (River), had been in Romania, but the Russian wide-gauge railroad line

¹³ Lugoș, 33 miles ESE of Temeswar

¹⁴ Давай, давай, быстро

¹⁵ On the Danube, 83 miles SSE of Lugosch

¹⁶ 61 miles ESE of Turnu Severin) to Pitești (66 miles NE of Craiova

¹⁷ 66 miles NE of Craiova

¹⁸ Iași, 206 miles NNE of Pitești

¹⁹ An area now in NW Romania

²⁰ Slovaks

²¹ Macea, 15 miles N of Arad

²² Ungeny, 10 miles ENE of Jassy

already began here. We met other Glogowatzers who already on the first day of the collection were taken away, and their families were torn apart in Sighet.

The wide-gauge cars were wider inside than the Romanian. The furnishings again were plank beds right and left of the doors. There also was a hole in the floor like in the Romanian cars. Mind you, the Russian cars were constructed with double walls. We also had a stove, but often were left without wood so that little by little we stripped the inside walls of wood—at first under the plank beds—and used it as fuel.

Again, we were forty to fifty persons in the cars. We had again arranged it so that the women and girls lay above on the plank beds and we boys and men below on the floor. A few blankets and long sheepskin coats were laid on the floor and we covered ourselves with the rest. The women had blankets on the plank beds and some blankets made with goose feathers as well to cover themselves. In the blankets and in the double walls, however, the vermin were able to nest well. After the war, the cars were still lice-ridden and full of bugs. And who even thought about cleaning or delousing a car?

We traveled into the unknown like that and it was colder and colder so that our water turned into ice in the bottles and jugs. Due to the freezing, the bottles broke into pieces and we had to put the containers high on the plank beds and keep warm with blankets so that the water did not freeze. Our daily rations consisted of tea, dry bread and dried fish or smoked lamb because anything that was not dried froze right away. I could also happen that the rations failed to appear several days. All the Glogowatzers had brought along some food; apart from that, we had some bread but it was frozen hard and together with the meat had to be beaten into pieces before consumption. There was no soup or warm water and would also have frozen before it reached us. For all that, thirst still tormented us much more than hunger.

It depressed us not to know in which area we were. One time when there was a stop to fetch water, the cars were unlocked by turns and the sentry shouted how many people were allowed to get out to fetch water. But there was far too little water and rations, as well as coal for heating. The water was brought in buckets and distributed into the vessel in the car. This emergency water supply had to be stored on the plank bed and guarded by the men because everybody was constantly thirsty and really could not quench it. (...) I do not know how it happened but it got around that we would stop in the railroad station of Orel.²³ And when that was right, it was not surprising that such a severe cold prevailed: so far we had always traveled northeastwards. The severe cold brought us to the edge of despair and now the inside walls above the plank bed were also knocked out and used as fuel. One time when the sentry came to us in the car, we somehow screened the knocked-down wall so that he did not notice it.

Two days and two nights, we traveled through a landscape full of pine forests. Then came an area without woods and we stopped in the city of Orenburg.²⁴ It was a German city only according to the name. After an additional day, some cars were uncoupled and in that way relatives had now been separated. After an additional day, the train stopped at the Ural River on the 7th of March 1945. As always, the doors

²³ 200 miles SSW of Moscow

²⁴ 360 miles NNE of the Caspian Sea

were pushed open but now came the order to get out together with the baggage. The journey from Ungheni this far had lasted 21 days.

All the passengers of the cars stood in organized groups below the railroad embankment and were guarded by a sentry, while the officers examined the interiors of the cars. When they saw the damage caused, they swore at us and demanded compensation through an interpreter. The damage of our cars was estimated at 45,000 Lei.²⁵ All of us had refused to pay. After a few hours of waiting, there was movement in the groups beside the railroad embankment. We were taken for delousing and into the bath by turns. From there, we went into a camp.

2. In Barracks full of Bugs

Our camp was a large rectangular building with very many rooms, which was supposed to have originally been a school complex. In the rooms, were the wooden plank-beds organized in rows of three and attracted the vermin. Unfortunately, there was far too little space for so many people: we were 1500 people on our arrival. But after the long journey, we finally had a solid floor under our feet again and a warm room with plank beds in rows of three as some place to lie. It was still narrow but still better than in the car since after a long time we were able to lie down again and sleep. My blanket and sheepskin coat were left behind in the car because they were frozen so hard on the floor. Now, we finally had a lavatory and it was time to think about shaving. Good heavens, how we seventeen-year-old boys looked! The beard first had to be attended to with the scissors; luckily a Glogowatzer boy had one with him.

After my accident, I had to sleep on a lower plank bed. There, it was always dark and the bugs loved that. Since the smell of fresh blood still clung to my wound, the vermin were especially attracted. With this plague of bugs, they were awful, sleepless nights. In the morning, one was more tired than in the evening and the body was full of red spots and lines. These bugs were malicious tormenters.

When I worked again after my accident, I earned my rubles but got nothing since I had debts in the camp. For almost a year, I had not worked and so about 400 rubles camp charges had accrued monthly for food, laundry, delousing, light, heating and so forth, which I was not able to pay. Everything was written down and later deducted.

3. Heavy Labor under Strict Supervision

In the camp, the sorting out, the interrogation and the investigation, which were repeated several times, began. One was questioned what one has learned, how many school years and in which subject one has finished; whether one has begun an apprenticeship or worked with the parents on the farmstead which also was the case among most of us boys. The older men were immediately questioned about their occupation. Depending on scores or departments, one took us into a large hall, where gave us lectures with illustrative films about the sequence of events of the assigned work. That was very instructive for us.

²⁵ \$67,000 in 2005

After the sorting out and assignment, we were again led around and taken into the rooms which were assigned to the jobs. I was assigned to a brigade which unloaded freight cars.

Our factory was a large nickel combine in which nickel was produced from raw materials, from variegated soil and from rocks. The raw materials were brought here from places far away and delivered to a large shed. This shed was very tall and at the same time five meters²⁶ deep with four railroad tracks which were built on strong concrete pillars. Twenty freight cars were able to come into the approximately 200 meters²⁷ long shed. Above, ran strong cranes which took the raw material to bins and it moved out of there to the Martins blast furnaces by 75 meters²⁸ long and 1.2 meters²⁹ wide conveyor belts. The blast furnaces stood likewise in a long and very tall shed. After the raw material was mixed with coke, it was melted by high heat. The nickel produced that was, of course, was still not pure.

So on the first of April 1945, the work time began for all of us. Our brigade, which was responsible for unloading freight cars, worked in a large shed called “Drabilna”³⁰ in two shifts of twelve hours. The three brigades contained forty persons each. After we had worked 12 hours from seven to seven o’clock PM, one was free 24 hours. A train with 20 cars always moved in front of the shed and a locomotive with 10 cars drove really slowly in, so that some men were able to beat open the trapdoors on the floor of the cars. On every side of the car hung seven trapdoors on two hooks which during the shipment were equipped with a safety device. During the opening of the trapdoors, two men stood on each side of the car, in the course of which the first opener held a hammer of two kilograms³¹ in his hands and the second a hammer of five kilograms.³² While the train came in, the first opener beat the two safeties as well as one hook, on which the trapdoor hung, open. The second hook was beaten open by the second man with the heavy hammer. Since now the entire load hung on this hook, a hard blow was necessary. With the fall downward of the trapdoor, the raw material tumbled into the depth where it was transported to the bin by the crane. After the cars were unloaded, the women had to clean them because every stone or lump of soil hindered the closing of the trapdoors. Each trapdoor weighed about 400 kg³³ and closing the trapdoor was a very hard task. For that, two groups of four men each and two crowbars were necessary. A car had fourteen trapdoors and 100 cars were unloaded daily. Closing the 1400 trapdoors was a very hard job. In addition, many trapdoors were twisted or bent by the crane. Then several hammer blows were necessary and those outside in the open air during rain and snowstorm and also during -40° cold.³⁴

When there were very many cars to unload, the master stood behind us during an icy cold night shift and drove us until midnight so that we had to work like animals.

²⁶ 16 feet

²⁷ 660 feet

²⁸ 250 feet

²⁹ 4 feet

³⁰ Дробильна, predicative short form for “crushing”

³¹ 4.4 pounds

³² 11 pounds

³³ 440 lb

³⁴ This temperature is the same on both scales

In addition, a few Russians also came to us so that we closed the trapdoors with three groups. In such peak periods, we did not go once more before the start of the shift to the meeting hall where the last shift was discussed and many were criticized. Only seldom was a commendation given.

If one time fewer cars arrived, the distribution was revised before the start of the shift. Then the master took me, usually with two girls, along to the 75 m long conveyor belts on which the ore and soil were transported to the blast furnaces. Often stones fell down from the belts and had to be put back. Here, it was simpler and one was able to work slower than at the cars, but in the blast furnaces during the burning the coke produced coal gas which caused us a lot of trouble.

4. Additional Jobs

Move

It was the middle of September when we had to move to another camp. The people from the building had gotten it ready. The move was carried out in groups and according to rooms. We hoped at least to get iron beds this time, but unfortunately again only three-part wooden plank beds were in the long and wide concrete building. Approximately four hundred people were accommodated in the building. This camp was not better than the old and moreover it was situated outside of the city and of the factory grounds. Three barracks were ready, the fourth was finished during the move and for the fifth, designated for the women, only the foundation was poured. Therefore, everyone who had no work, I mean the sick, had to help with the construction so that the women soon were able to move in. They also received the more hygienic iron beds.

Invalid Work

On this construction site, there were also all kinds of things for sick or injured people like me to do. Our camp commandant at that time was a monster who drove all the invalids to work. Therefore with the one hand in a sling, I tried to clear away stones, brick remnants and waste as best I could. The commandant always watched us during the work and, if we worked too slowly for him, he became furious, threw stones at us and cursed us.

When, with the injured hand in the arm sling, I was forced to work again by the commandant, I got a broom in the healthy hand and was supposed to keep the footpaths in the large shed clean, just as far as it went. Actually, it was better in the factory than in the camp. There were bigger portions here and I was able to obtain a bit to eat at the same time as I gathered and took boards and scrap wood to the canteen and for that received a portion of rice, barley or oats with a spoon of oil on it. It did not go so well with the sweeping because the finger was still in the bandage and the hand in the sling. Three weeks passed like that in which I actually worked only a little.

As an Officer's Servant

After a rest in the camp, I became an officer's servant with a Russian lieutenant who was the company leader of my barracks. Every building constituted a company

and was led by a company leader and him in turn by the camp commandant. A few of our people who were able to speak Russian well functioned as interpreters. For the most part, they came from Bessarabia and from Bukowina.

My lieutenant was an unpredictable person. Already in the morning when he came into the camp, he started shouting. When he had called my name, I quickly hurried to him to receive his orders. At first, his manner made great difficulties for me but in the end I got used to him because dogs who bark a lot do not bite. My job was to keep the room clean. In addition, I was an errand boy besides. Sometimes all ten company commandants held a discussion which lasted for hours. And if they had really celebrated, one did not recognize the room again afterwards: The ashtrays were full to the brim and the sunflower shells lay around everywhere. Once during the tidying up, I found a ten ruble banknote³⁵ lying on the floor in a corner. I gave the banknote back, and with a smile one gave me to understand that I was an honest person. Often, one sent me to the canteen to fetch or to deal with something. Then, I was thankful that it always gave something for me to do and that at the same time I was able to satisfy my hunger.

At the Conveyor Belts

There were three shifts at the conveyor belts. Now, the master formed a fourth shift with the girls and me. The shifts worked from 7 AM to 3 PM, from 3 to 11 PM and from 11 PM to 7 AM, and after three shift changes we had a day free. I no longer know how many hours we had worked in a month, but sometimes we had to work overtime to fulfill the monthly target. That took place after change of shift and we had to tidy up the factory yard.

My workplace looked like this: There was a bin and a machine with a very powerful motor; the whole was a stone crusher. The bin was 2.5 m³⁶ wide at the top, 1.8 m³⁷ at the bottom and 2 m³⁸ high. In the middle, there was a block cast from metal which had an opening of 85 cm³⁹ at the top and two side openings of 15 cm⁴⁰ at the bottom. Thus, an 85 cm wide stone was able to pass in at the top and pieces of 15 cm were able to fall out at the bottom. The block with the powerful motor revolved slowly with a vibrating motion and crushed the nickel ore containing stones. The nickel ore was brought to the bin from above by the crane, reduced to small pieces by the stone crusher and transported upward to the blast furnaces on the conveyor belts. Two bins operated simultaneously in front of the conveyor belts.

It was my job to operate the stone crushing machine. The workers communicated with colored light signals. For every material, like stones, gypsum stones, mud or soil, there were specific light signals. I got such a signal from the blast furnaces and passed it to the crane operators. The master, the mechanic and I had a special signal. If I wanted to pass something on to the girls at the bottom, I beat on a pipe and spoke with them through the pipe.

³⁵ About \$12.30 in 2005

³⁶ 8.2 ft

³⁷ 5.9 ft

³⁸ 6.6 ft

³⁹ 33 in

⁴⁰ 6 in

Altogether, there were eight conveyor belts with a length of 75 m, in connection with which two always ran beside one another. Where the conveyor belts ran together there was a machine and it took the material from one conveyor belt onto the other. This machine was operated by the girls who also worked with different signals. There were 30 signals altogether, if I remember well. The Russian girls had to clean the machines because they were always fouled with soil and mud.

I did this work gladly and it was lighter than unloading the cars. And when I was hungry, I looked out for anything combustible, wood or boards, took this to the canteen and had a plate of food given to me for it. But that was not so simple because I was not able to leave this workplace unsupervised. The girls had to stand in for me then. If they were not able to come, I also called the mechanic or the master. If stones or dried soil was transported, I only had to watch and pay attention to the signals. If however the material was wet, the machines and conveyor belts became stopped up and there was a load of work. In the course of this, I signaled to the crane operator so that for a short time he threw no more material into the bin. Or if a large stone lay on its wide side and was not able to slide into the 85 cm wide opening of the stone crusher, I had to push and turn it with a four meter⁴¹ long steel rod until the stone fell in at the top and after a few seconds fell out in small pieces at the bottom. Far too large stones, the mechanic or the master had to beat to pieces by hand. I was not in a position for that with my injured hand and one had understanding of that.

Of course, I also had other experiences. One time when we had worked a lot of overtime and were free in return for it, a brigadier on duty came one morning. He woke us up and ordered that we get dressed and were supposed to go in front of the barracks. He then went out of the barracks and came again after a while. Since we were still not ready, he screamed like a devil. Since I was the first in the row, he grabbed me by the feet. He pulled me from the plank bed; but fortunately I still was able to keep hold of myself. When the other boys saw that, they ran horrified from there.

There were many such monsters among the brigadiers. A few had also beaten women, even during the work. One cannot forget that.

With the Masons

The war was already over for almost three years and more and more soldiers returned home. On the 1st of February 1948, a Russian, whom I had to train for a month, came to my job. After that, I was dismissed. I had gotten on very well with the good fellow workers and the master and I was sorry about them. Together with other people dismissed, I came to a clean-up brigade which had to clear away refuse from the blast furnaces.

After a month, I was taken from the main camp in Orsk⁴² to Mednogorst⁴³ and quartered in a barracks in which German prisoners of war were put up before us. I was assigned to the masons who continued the work of the German prisoners of war on a building. The walls were crooked and slanting since they had been put up in the

⁴¹ 13 feet

⁴² 180 miles ESE of Orenburg

⁴³ 120 miles ESE of Orenburg

winter with -35 to -40°C⁴⁴ temperatures and that is actually impossible. And now we were supposed to plaster these walls. I understood nothing at all about this work and was moreover still appointed to the plastering of the ceilings. Although I had never before even held a trowel in my hand, I was now supposed to throw the plaster onto the ceilings. In the first three days, I had more plaster on my back than on the ceilings but with the help of my master from Wilagosch (Hellburg) my work turned out better and better. The human being is teachable and adaptable.

5. An Accident and its Treatment

In the middle of June 1945, I went from the hard closing of the trapdoors to the trapdoor openers. Here, I became first opener and had to beat open the two safeties and one hook of the mounting. One had to be very nimble during the opening. However when the locomotive drove in too quickly, sometimes a trapdoor remained hanging on a hook. When the car stood on the concrete pillars, then one was only able to beat open the last hook in two ways: From above while one sat on the metal wall or from below while one crawled through on the traverses of the railroad track under the axles up to the stuck trapdoor. This belated opening of the unloading trapdoors, be it from above or from below, was a dangerous job but it had to be done.

I was already with the openers for six weeks when on the 31st of July 1945, on a Sunday, we went to the night shift. The workload was normal and the shift did not appear to be unusual. We had some ore cars, which had to be unloaded, standing on the tracks. The engine again had driven in too quickly so that a few trapdoors were not able to be opened. I now crawled through on my knees and elbows under six axles to the place where a trapdoor was still to be closed. There, I moved into position, i.e. I knelt behind the narrow metal traverse so that my head was under it. With the shovel, I bashed on the hooks until the trapdoor fell down. The trapdoors lay on metal supports and one had to pay attention to them so that they did not fall on one's head.

Now, the trapdoor had fallen down, and from this minute a long and difficult life of suffering began for me.

To this day, I still cannot really understand how after the opening and falling down of the trapdoor, I was able to crawl back through again under six axles on knees and elbows on the railroad tracks with the work gloves, which we always wore, and with the shovel in my hand without noticing at all that I had just suffered a terrible accident. When I had crawled out from under the train and wanted to stand, I had the feeling that something in my hand tingled. I wanted to take off the glove and have a look; then I collapsed. It was between midnight and one AM.

The comrades took off the gloves for me, bandaged the wounded hand as best they even could to check the heavy bleeding and took me to the infirmary. There, two nurses received me, opened the emergency bandage and saw the damage: Three fingers were shattered, the flesh hung down from the hand. On the ring finger, the bone was still present but I do not know in which condition it was. I lay on a bed and received a bandage around the hand again without any treatment whatsoever. The

⁴⁴ -31 to -40°F

hand was dirty and the blood flowed over the dirt. One put the hand somewhat higher so that the bleeding would decrease; then I was left on my own.

At seven o'clock in the morning, the nurses came again. The blood still dripped over the hand and dried up and encrusted over the dirt. The women thought that one has to do something himself since one is not able to reach the doctor and asked me whether I agree with an operation. Naturally, I agreed immediately. Now, they put me on the operating table, strapped me tightly and gave me injections in every finger. I no longer know how long the operation lasted; I only know that the nurses spoke with me during the entire operation and constantly asked me how I feel and whether I have any pain. I, however, had no pain during the entire operation.

After the operation, I noticed that the middle finger, the ring finger and the little finger of my left hand had been removed. Then everything was dabbed with iodine, a bandage applied around every finger and after that again around the entire hand. With my hand in a sling, I was sent to the distant camp and left alone with my dejection. One only said to me in addition that I am supposed to come back in eight days to change the bandage.

In the camp, I was questioned by my fellow workers what had happened then and why I had not remained in the hospital. Why not, indeed? A comrade had always warned me that I was supposed to be careful during the opening, but now it was too late. The plank beds were very high and one needed both hands to climb high. Now, I no longer was able to do that; because of that, one of the men offered me his place to lie at the bottom. Nothing else was left to me, but it was dark at the bottom and one was handed over defenseless to the plague of bugs.

I worried a lot when I looked at my dirty hand on which the blood was encrusted. But how to clean it? Then, help came from one of the men who had a friend in the canteen. This comrade procured a liter of warm water for me in the evening. With it, I cleaned the injured hand as best I could without changing the bandage. But how was I supposed to wait eight days until I finally was allowed to go to the hospital to change the bandage? I knew that right at that time a man and a woman lay in the hospital after an accident. The woman had injured her leg so badly that she had to be operated on three times. In the end, the leg was amputated; the reason was gangrene because of the careless treatment. Yet, several months after the end of the war there was indeed nothing at all aside from iodine and dressing for a proper treatment after an operation. Also, I visited the man in the hospital, but what I saw frightened me. He showed me his finger which lay in a hand bandage and was just swarming with little worms. The misfortune only happened due to the minor contusion of the index finger, but the consequences looked terrible. Fortunately, the man later lost only his finger and not the entire hand.

Under these circumstances, I worried more and more about my finger, my hand, indeed about my life itself. And so, I decided to go to the hospital earlier than ordered to change the bandage and to have the wound examined. Since I was only able to show the appointment in eight days, it was not simple to go out of the camp. I went on Thursday, therefore four days after my accident, to the medical orderly on the camp. There was a room for medical treatment in the camp, but the doctor only came twice a week. A medical orderly, however, was always there. Therefore, I went to him, showed him my hand in the sling and said I had a whole lot of pain and

could not sleep. Of course, my worries were greater than the pain and I was not able to sleep because of the bugs. Buy I was lucky: The medical orderly gave me a permit to be able to go earlier to the hospital. I only had, in addition, to arrange it with the officer on duty, but that was no problem.

So on Friday morning right after the meal, I went on foot from the camp to the five kilometers⁴⁵ distant hospital. First, I visited the man with the wounded finger and saw his situation. Then, I waited in front of the treatment room. When it was my turn, I showed the medical orderly's permit and my certificate of discharge after the operation. I was sworn at then because I had come earlier and had washed my hand clean. Since, however, I had not removed the bandage from my fingers, one looked after mine. When the bandage was removed, I was able to see how things stood with my fingers. They were still full of iodine. Without cleaning them, iodine dabbed on them again and each finger bandaged individually. During the discharge, I received a certificate to come again in five days to have the stitches removed. Also since now the fingers still were not cleaned, I continued to worry a lot about my hand. So, I went back to the camp in order not to miss the meal because I was always very, very hungry.

As was scheduled, I went to the hospital again to have my operation stitches removed. A little iodine was put on the wound, otherwise nothing. It hurt a lot, but I saw that it was getting better and now knew that I no longer had to worry so much. I received a certificate for further treatment in the camp, if one can call it that because in reality nothing more was done than pouring a little iodine over the wound, which still hurt a lot. Nevertheless, I was relieved.

I removed the bandage from the fingers; once again got some warm water cleaned the encrusted fingers as best I could. Eleven days after the accident, I was over the mountain. I had to continue going to the camp doctor and received a medical certificate every second week and had to carry the arm in a hand sling.

Until the end of October, I tried to work like this, but then I noticed that something was not right with my fingers. They were often swollen up, constantly cold and blue-colored, and it became worse and worse. The constant pain was added to that and finally one recognized that I no longer was fit for work since I did nothing with my ailing hand. The doctor recognized that I was no longer able to go to the factory. I remained in the camp where, admittedly, there was less to eat.

In winter, my fingers were always swollen up, cold and blue due to the cold. With the warmth in summer, things went better for the injured fingers.

6. In the Camp Prison and at the Medical Round

On a Monday morning, all the sick and injured people from the camp had to line up; there were more than a hundred. Then, the papers, i.e. the kind of illness and the order of the days off, of everyone were checked. Finally, two groups were formed. In the first, the documents of the sick people were in order. In the second group, stood men whose documents—according to the opinion of the commandant—were not or not completely valid. Unfortunately, I stood with the group whose documents were not in order and that only because I was not able to come across with the last

⁴⁵ 3 miles

visit to the doctor who as a rule always extended my medical leave and confirmed my inability to work in writing. I was only able to speak with a medical orderly who thought that it was not otherwise bad and is sufficient if I come again in two weeks to speak with the doctor. In my difficult situation, there was not point in explaining to the camp commandant why I have no affirmation of illness. He was very outraged since approximately half of all the sick and injured people had no complete and valid documents. He ordered all the “malingerers” like me to be locked up over night and everyone sent with his brigade to work on the next morning.

Therefore, we spent the night in a concrete bunker,⁴⁶ which we called our prison. We were herded together like cattle in a room so that nobody was able to fall over. And in the morning, we had to go to work with our brigades.

One day, a medical commission came and we sick people were summoned to the examination. The doctors looked at my fingers and talked with one another. Finally, I had to undress and was examined from top to bottom. I had to put my foot on a chair; one pressed on the toe bones then afterwards on top of the foot. Finally, one was gently pinched on the buttock. That was probably the conclusion in the secret language of the doctors. After this procedure, I was allowed to go.

Later, they said that a medical transport would travel home and that I would be with it as well. The sick people were taken away and traveled home. I was not among them because—as I later learned—someone must have bought himself my place in the medical transport with a lot of bribe-money (in Romanian currency). I do not know whether that is correct but at that time such things were pulled as well.

7. Interrogation and Spying

Right after our arrival in the work camp, we were questioned about each other and I believe that the authorities had already recruited informers at this time. One night after my accident, about one AM, I was sought by a sentry. He came into the room and shouted my name around. Since I was not able to sleep anyway, I was on my feet right away and reported. He ordered me to get dressed and come along. We went into a room in which three officers were already waiting and already a cross-examination began. The officers questioned me about my accident. They did not want to believe me that I was not able to describe exactly how the accident had taken place. To this day, however, I still do not know and was only able to advance suppositions. That, however, was not enough for the masters and they reproached me that I had planned everything like that. Then, my whole world collapsed about me and I began to cry. Nevertheless, one yelled at me further and new questions, which I had to answer crying, always bombarded me in the cross-examination. An interpreter translated as best he even could. The entire interrogation lasted about one and one half hours. When I came back to the room again, my colleagues, who had been wakened by the shouts of the guards, asked me what one wanted from me. I was still beside myself and replied only briefly that one accused me of having planned the accident so that I would be allowed to go home.

In fact, there was a spy system in the camp right from the beginning. I was just amazed about the precise questions which the officer put to me during the cross-

⁴⁶ Slang for guardhouse

examination. They knew about us exactly what property everyone owned, how many cows, horses, and swine we owned at home and also that I had no siblings. It was up to the officers, however, to find out whether I had planned the accident to go home quickly to my property. That and still more, one had accused me of during the cross-examination. But because I was not able to say more about the accident, the interrogation was ended.

Then the thought came to me that an informer had his hand there in the game. Namely, the questionings were repeated. In the course of three weeks, I was questioned four times and that always at night between one and three AM. But these questionings lasted only half as long as the first. In the fourth questioning only, some record was taken down without even sounding me out.

I had great fear of the questionings. I already became afraid when the guard soldier called my name to fetch me. My God, how I felt at this time and what happened to me considering all the terrible events: accident, operation, concern about my hand, insomnia, bugs, in addition to that the inhuman cross-examination and constant pain and hunger. I would not like to describe what happened in me. But the thought often came to me, why was I born anyway since I only had to suffer?

8. Omnipresent Hunger

Scanty Daily Ration

The scanty food was not adequate for the hard work. Daily, I received 1 kg⁴⁷ of bread, but many were entitled to only 750 g.⁴⁸ In the morning, we received a soup, put better some vegetables like cabbage, cucumbers and tomatoes with some warm, soured water on them. A few times, a fish head or a fishtail even swam in it. At noon, there was pearl barley, barley, millet or rice boiled with water. Very rarely, there was a small piece of smoked lamb or goat meat. At the start of April when I started to work, I still had approximately one kilogram of bacon and some fat and sugar in cans in addition. In order to conserve, I had limited my daily ration to a finger-wide piece of bacon. There was also a lack of the bread for bacon and fat. Nevertheless, in the middle of May all the stocks were already used up.

Salt and Raw Cucumbers

Once, my hunger was so great that I—like a goat—licked a little salt and drank water after that to calm my stomach a little.

Once, we traveled alongside the Ural River to a Kolchos⁴⁹ to fetch hay so that we were able to fill up our mattresses. We traveled most gladly when we had to fetch something for the canteen because then one was able to nibble something at once. Once, we traveled to fetch fresh cucumbers. We sat on top of the big truck with fresh cucumbers. On the trip home, we “devoured” (the word used often refers to the way animals eat) just as many cucumbers as we were able, but afterwards I got diarrhea. The hunger was simply gigantic and omnipresent. There were cucumbers and cabbage but in Siberia, on the border between Europe and Asia, we saw no fruit at all.

⁴⁷ 2.2 lb

⁴⁸ 1.7 lb

⁴⁹ Колхоз, collective farm

Serving of Meals

During the early shift, we took the food in the factory because every department had its own canteen. There was breakfast during the start of work, midday meal only if there was time just then, but if sometimes there were up to 120 cars to unload the midday meal simply did not take place. There was evening meal when the work was finished. If now the midday meal came with it, we had eaten nothing at all in the course of twelve hours of heavy labor.

The night shift lasted from seven o'clock in the evening to seven o'clock in the morning. During this shift, there was the morning meal in the camp, the midday meal before the beginning of the night shift about six-thirty PM and the evening meal remained for the night between twelve and one AM. If there was no time to eat during the work, the night shift got the evening and morning meals all at once. One still would have been able to eat seven times as much, but during the work time of 12-13 hours the food would have been necessary.

On the night shift, we often received the food first at 3 or 4 o'clock AM instead of 12 o'clock and then it was no longer warm. If we had to work through continuously, the men who had to work in the open air during storm and sleet occasionally received a little drink of schnapps or vodka for strengthening. Naturally, bread would have been preferred by us but schnapps also did good since it warmed up a little from the inside.

When there was no time to eat with the large amount of work and then after work the midday, evening and morning meals were served all at once, there was a soup for every worker, with it boiled millet with a little oil on it or even a piece of smoked meat. The kilogram of bread with it was not sufficient to satisfy the fierce hunger.

Vodka instead of Food

Once when during a night shift, again there was no time for food and our strength faded, the master brought a jug with vodka and poured a little drink for all the workers in the open air with rain and cold. But who was able even to drink this stuff? When one saw that we were not able to because the vodka was much too strong for us, it was mixed with water. It certainly went better that way. The Russians naturally gulped down vodka without water since they were used to this hooch. Then the female cooks brought filled rolls for the entire shift, this time even with tasty sausage. But only one roll for each! Dear Heavens, I do not know how many rolls each of us would have eaten up. In the end, we had to work through not only until seven but until nine o'clock in the morning, 14 hours. Therefore, we had eaten nothing more for 26 hours and in the course of this heavy labor had nothing in the stomach aside from a filled roll and a swallow of vodka.

Raw Cabbage Heads

I still have pleasant memories of a particular experience. Once again there were a lot of cars to unload and at the end of the train stood a closed, covered car. When we came in its vicinity, it suddenly smelled of cabbage. I no longer know how it happened but all of a sudden vast numbers of cabbage heads rolled out of the car. We quickly closed the door of the car and descended upon the cabbage like rabbits. Well,

we really were animals, as we sometimes were called, because hunger can make an animal grow out of a human. In the end, the entire brigade assembled around these cabbage heads. How many I consumed, I no longer know but it was surely a few. How lucky can one be when one with an always hungry stomach is able to eat himself full and satiated one time, even if it was only cabbage heads?

After that, the prisoners came back to their previous work places. And when they saw the cabbage, they descended upon it like us. Since they really were prisoners and were guarded on the job, they were even much more starved than us. When the cabbage was all gone, everyone licked their lips and was happy to have satisfied the constant hunger one time. Probably, nobody noticed that a couple fewer cabbage heads were in the car.

At Least Bread Crumbs

During the early shift when we were counted at the entrance gate, we guys hurried to reach the canteen as early as possible. You see, the bread wagon always stood there and whoever was there first was allowed to help with the unloading of the bread. Often, I was the fastest near the bread wagon. After the unloading, we scraped all the bread crumbs together and put them into a cap or a small sack. I always had that ready just in case more crumbs were collected than the cap contained.

One morning, I again was first to arrive at the wagon which, however, was already unloaded. Since a door stood open, I was able to check whether anything was still left over. I stuck my hand into the interior of the wagon and investigated the floor by feel in the dark. And—what luck—I found even a two kilo⁵⁰ loaf of bread. I stowed the bread under my jacket and ran with it to the dining hall. But since I was not able to take the bread along inside, I quickly buried it in the snow beside my workplace and went to the meal. Had it not been a theft? A starved person thinks no more about it.

I ate my breakfast quickly, hurried to the dressing-room then to change my clothes and then to my workplace to take over the shift. And my colleague from the night shift was hardly gone when I dug up the bread again. When the machines started at the start of the shift, the bread was already devoured. The whole thing happened in a happy three-quarter hour.

After the night shift, we already receive a kilogram of bread for the whole day at the morning meal. Many ate up everything at once so that they had to eat the cabbage soup at midday without any bread. Sometimes, I also had to control myself very carefully not to eat up the bread immediately. Above all, it was very difficult on the way back to the camp not to think of the bread in the pocket. For all that, I always managed not to touch the bread right up to the camp. But when one lay there like that and was not able to fall asleep because one always had to think of the kilo of bread, the hand then reached for the bread again and again after all and tore off a piece from it. Then one tried again to fall asleep but it was impossible; one did not get any peace. Finally, one sat up and ate up all the bread. The thoughts now were able to detach themselves from the bread. One was able to lie down in peace and peacefully fall asleep. That is the sad truth. Only someone who has lived through that can understand it.

⁵⁰ 4.4 lb

A Dog as a Rival for Food

One day when we were on the march from work back to the barracks, a dog ran to us over the path. It had something long in its mouth which it pulled along behind itself: a strip of cut entrails. We threw at the dog until it let its booty fall and disappeared, a stroke of luck for us. We took the meat along, washed it and cooked a potato soup from it with meat supplement. Our cook place consisted of two bricks, a cook bucket and a little firewood.

In the main camp of Orsk, where almost 1600 people lived together, there was also cooking like this in open air beside the barbed-wire fence. Oh, and was everything concocted there! At the market of Orsk, we were only able to buy potatoes for ourselves. One who worked at a Kolchos or Sowchos⁵¹ was able to afford more (above all cucumbers and cabbage) but also not much because with the bad climate only a little thrived.

In the camp, there were many undernourished people who had no money and also not the opportunity to go out of the camp to collect some grass or leaves for a soup. It would be too sad to tell everything that was stirred together like that, to which hunger had driven the people.

Purchase of Food

When I was paid my wages in the third year, I also was able to purchase some food for me for my money. But only now and then I purchased something simple for me from the bazaar in front of the camp. It was a round flat dough cake just baked on a plate without fat or oil. In the factory canteen, I purchased even better things if such were available. We had a big stroke of luck after the currency reform 10:1 when we were able to purchase unlimited food from the canteen stockroom if we had enough money. Good Heavens, that which I stuffed in myself at that time in a day; afterwards I never was able to eat myself full for years. If the queue in front of the sales counter was not too big, I daily even purchased four kilos for me in addition to my kilo of bread, besides one-two kilos of sugar, oil and a good portion of sausage. I consumed so much daily because my appetite was great.

After three weeks, the raw food no longer tasted good to us. Because of that, the sugar was burned and tea made from it; we mixed oil and sugar into a kind of honey. It went like that for seven weeks until the storeroom was empty and there also was nothing more to get in the storeroom of the factory canteen. The marvelous time did not last long but it was sufficient for it that we had gotten ourselves good spare tires for lean times.

The THIRST is Terrible

Sometimes, we had to fetch water from distant places during the stop time of the train and by the time we came back to our freight car it was already frozen in the buckets. Then nothing else was left to us than to smash in the layer of ice and lick up the ice. The shortage of water tormented us during the journey; we had no longer washed or shaved ourselves for fourteen days, but it was still much worse with the women. Thirst makes one inventive and so we licked the hoarfrost from the metal

⁵¹ COBX03, state farm

places in the interior of the car with our tongues. And so many a time, we asked ourselves the question whether in such a situation the human is still a human. Also while writing this down after fifty years, tears still come to me. (...) When then we had adequate fresh water in the camp, it took days until we had quenched our thirst.

8. Humanity and Helpfulness

In my difficult situation after the accident, there was a lot of helping me by Glogowatzers and other fellow workers. It was not material help, rather through conversations and good words. They came to me again and again; I cannot forget one of them in particular. It was an older Banater man; I have forgotten his name but from his age he would have been able to be my father. This man knew how to speak with me, an eighteen-year old. Conversations with him did me a lot of good in my situation and I succeeded thus in being able to cope with myself. I also have to express my great gratitude to *Cousin Adam Porst* for his help because without him I hardly would have been able to get through all of it. Since there was so little to eat in the camp Cousin Adam always brought along a little for me when he visited me. He also asked me almost every time whether I had enough money. At first, I wanted to accept none, but I had to do it to be able to survive. I accepted the money but said it is only for the time until I am able to work again and earn some money. That was 16 months, however, and Cousin Adam loaned me roughly 1450 rubles⁵² in this time. From this money, I purchased something for me to eat in the bazaar in front of the camp. In the camp, one was able to buy himself nothing, except one exchanged his bread for something different.

When I was not allowed to go with the medical transport, I was desperate. Then the older man helped me again. He comforted me seeing that after all everything has gone well with my hand and thought that one is supposed to look at human beings the way they really are and not the way one would have liked them. That way, one would be able to stand a lot of things easier. And he was right about that. While I was ailing in the camp, I often received the visit of my colleagues of the unloading brigade, also of the girls at the conveyor belts where I had worked when fewer ore cars had arrived. They asked me solicitously how things were with me and that the master of the conveyor belts often asked about the condition of my fingers.

The Russian fellow workers were also understanding and helpful. Although my master had four children and at that time it was very difficult to provide for a family of six, he invited me home with him several times. His wife had always prepared something to eat then. How he was even able to invite guests in his situation, I do not understand. Namely, it was difficult to see that someone, who would have needed help himself, wants to help others. Because of that, I sometimes helped him with the garden work and one time had a beautiful experience.

One day, I helped the master with the potato planting and did that like at home in rows and with the same spacing. Then his eyes popped out of his head and one thing he was not able to understand at all, why I heaped up the potato plants with soil during the second hoeing. I explained it to him and with the harvest he saw that the potatoes in this year were much nicer than up to then and took pleasure in that. He

⁵² About \$1780 in 2005

asked me a lot about our homestead and how we had worked because he already understood some of it. I had a very good relationship with him although he would have been able to be my father. His children in Byelorussia were as old as I. He spoke reluctantly about his first family at home. During such conversations, he sometimes looked at me with glassy eyes; I believe that the master thought of his children of my age then.

It was really a sorrowful time at that time. A large part of the Russian population was displaced from all directions. Of the girls, one came from Petersburg, the other from Byelorussia. My master came from there of course and had a homestead with horses in his homeland. His gray horses were his everything. He told about that gladly, especially when he had learned that my father also was a horse fool.

My master related that one morning an auto came, took him along and brought him here to the Ural River. First, all the abductees went to camp, were convicted and were forced to join the prisoner brigade, men and women separated for the work. Later, they were free but had to remain here.

In general, the Russian people were almost always very friendly and open toward us because actually they were really the same as us. They owned almost nothing themselves and still gave us something from the little that they possessed.

After the change, an about 50-years-old political camp commandant came, whom one was able to address as mister because in contrast to the earlier he was a human. I personally had nothing to do directly with him. But in our brigade there was a boy of my age from Bruckenau,⁵³ a hard-working worker and his father as well. When Franz saw the commandant in the yard, he rushed towards him and asked him for a cigarette with a military greeting. This he got quite frequently and also one for his father with it.

I still can remember well a particular experience. It was the beginning of 1947 and we had the afternoon shift of 3 to 11 PM. On the suggestion of three women from Kleinsanktnikilau, it was arranged that on the Saturday following after that we were supposed to go to the dancing in the camp right after work. In fact, we were just the same, in felt boots and in the cotton clothes for woman and man and above all everyone was supposed to put on their similar winter caps so that one is not recognized. The six couples were put together at random. We stood at the entrance door and when the band began with a piece of music we marched in pairs into the dance hall, which actually was our dining hall, and began to dance. When the commandant saw us dancing like that, he stood in the middle of the room and began to clap and after that everyone in the hall clapped. We were allowed to dance three dances and then had to take off our headgear to test the conjecture whether man and women always danced together. Smiling, the commandant looked at us, came towards us and gave each of us his hand because he had been pleased when he saw us dancing like that. Franz, the boy from Bruckenau, immediately got into a conversation with the commandant and received a cigarette from him. He also offered a cigarette to everyone left. He was a generous and friendly person, such as there had not been very many in his position.

10. Asiatic Steppe Climate

⁵³ Pişchia, 20 miles S of Arad

The time passed and the second winter in Russia began. There was a lot of frost; it was blustery and very cold. My fingers became somewhat bluish and swollen up. When they froze too badly, I had to put them in my mouth; that proved itself. Once when we had out make-up days, a fierce snowstorm broke out. Our engineer divided us into three groups and we had to clear away the snow at the entry gate of the ore trains during this snowstorm. But to the same extent as we cleared away the snow, the storm brought along new. It went like that for hours. We divided the work for us so that we always shoveled ten minutes above and warmed up below at the stove twenty minutes. I wondered why we had to do this work at all since the storm piled up the snow again and again. But it helped nothing; the work had to be done during the storm and at -40° .

At one AM, we were allowed to go to eat and to the camp after that. In the process, we left ourselves time and hoped the storm would ease off. But the storm became fiercer and fiercer. At 3 AM, we wanted to go back to the camp but no longer were able to find the path. Outside of swirling snow, nothing more could be seen. We had to go somehow to the factory gate where we had to show the passes. Finally, we found our way to the exit gate. The sentry gave us the instruction always to go alongside the power poles right to the camp. We were always supposed to look upwards so that we would be able to see the burning lights on the power poles. During such weather, we also got the instruction to look after each other. We were supposed to take care that face, nose and ears of another did not become too white, therefore freeze with pure cold. In such a case, the face had to be rubbed down with snow. And because one was not able to overcome his inclinations himself, another had to do that. In such a case, one becomes insensitive and, if nose and ears are already completely white, it is too late and they are frozen.

Therefore, we got going to the camp but that was not simple with such a whirlwind and driving snow. On the path to the camp, large piles of whirled-together snow had formed. We had to go around these so that we no longer were able to see the light of the lanterns. The helping ringing from the camp also could no longer be heard because of the roaring of the storm. Out of fear that we would be able to lose our way, we stopped and discussed how it was supposed to go on. We left a girl standing under the light post and went toward the next light post. That was not simple because after a few meters⁵⁴ one already was no longer able to see the light. Carefully, we reached the next light post in twos and I went back to the middle between the light posts. There, I called the girl from the first light post to me. She heard me because the storm helped from behind. We struggled from light post to the other like that and required, for a walk of fifteen to twenty minutes with normal weather, two full hours and arrived in the camp completely exhausted. I will never forget these hours, either.

Whether we, a small group with only three people, would have managed it if we would have walked along side by side, I doubt. On such catastrophic days, entire brigades with forty people had lost their way and had wandered off the path. Only in the morning, when the snowstorm had eased off somewhat, had they arrived in the camp, completely exhausted.

⁵⁴ Yards, one meter is 39.4 inches

The reader will wonder what we had worn in the way of clothes at that time. During heavy frost weather, we usually wore felt boots which almost never fit: they were either too small or too big. Consequently, we always had cold feet. In addition, we wore cotton clothes, usually two garments over one another. Around the neck, we tied a cloth and put a very sturdy snow hood on the head, which almost went over the shoulders. It had a round opening in front for eyes, nose and mouth. Since it was so unusually cold, we had engineered a little and pulled the opening so high that only the eyes were bare. Over the snow hood went the Russian winter cap. On the hands, we wore cotton gloves. Consequently, we were protected to some extent against the truly Siberian cold and the snowstorm if we did not have to hold out too long in the open air.

11. Other Experiences

During his camp stay in Orsk at the Ural River northeast of the Caspian Sea, Josef Walitschek had numerous experiences which convey a picture of the living conditions of the abductees in Camp Number 1902. Of course, still other compatriots remember similar events; because of that, a few of these vivid descriptions should be told here.

*Mahorka*⁵⁵ (Russian Tobacco) instead of Bread

At this time, there were no matches in Russia. When one wanted to light a cigarette, one had to strike stones together like in the Stone Age. But those had to be certain stones so that they shot out sparks, yet that also had to be learned. Thus, many scratched their fingers in the process without getting fire. My master had no time for something like that; therefore, he always came to me so that I helped him out. One also would have been able to press an iron wire on a running conveyor belt roller until it became so hot that one was able to light a cigarette on it but that was strictly forbidden for safety reasons. Therefore, the master always came to me with his Mahorka. That was a kind of tobacco made from cut up tobacco stems, which one wrapped in newspaper; naturally, there also was no cigarette paper. Many people were experts at this preparation because the thing really looked like a cigarette.

My workplace was right beside the entrance door to the conveyor belts of our nickel works. People constantly went back and forth here and for the most part at the same time it was also one who had a burning cigarette in his mouth. Therefore, we had arranged a signal for a burning cigarette so that another was able to light his own cigarette on the cigarette ember. The master gave me his cigarette for keeping, which I had to light for him. But by the time the master was able to come to me and claim the cigarette, on which I drew to keep it glowing, the cigarette often was already burned up.

It disturbed me that I had to draw on the cigarette until the master claimed it. Then, I was afraid to get used to it so much that I will no longer free myself from it. Some boys in the camp had already become really addicted to tobacco so that they even exchanged their bread for Mahorka. Because of that, they suffered even more hunger and a few paid for their addiction with their life.

⁵⁵ Махорка

It went about six months like that with the cigarette of the master and I tried to tell him that it disturbed me. I had, however, never dared correctly like that because I thought that he then would be angry with me and I did not want that. On a night shift, I did collect all my courage and told the master that I did not like the lighting of his cigarette and that it did not do me good.

After that, he smiled at me, gave me his hand, even embraced me and said to me, “Choroschij Josif”⁵⁶ “good Josef,” because the Russians called me that way. We got into a conversation and I told him that I was afraid because until then I had only smoked with my comrades and in the process only blew the smoke into the air. And I told him that I would not want to become a smoker. The master looked at me again smiling and said he would have already considered for a long time that something was not right with me. He thought that I might have bad news from home. I assured him that it was only the cigarettes and asked him whether he now was angry with me. He gave me his hand again and said, “No, no!” So, the drama was finished for me. I was happy that now we understood each other even better than before.

Mail from Home

My exchange of letters with the homeland began with the Russian Red Cross cards. As far as I can remember, already in 1945 we were allowed to write cards to home, and I received the answer to my two communications at the beginning of 1946. I wrote the first card after my accident, the second when things already went better with me. I learned for the answer that my father had already come home in 1945. He was drafted into the military labor service in 1944 and abducted from there to Russia. One had already learned of my accident at home. My master quite frequently asked me whether I had received letters from home. So he always knew whether I got mail. I no longer know exactly how many cards and letter I had written home and received from home. I had collected and saved everything. Unfortunately, these cards and letters remained back in Glogowatz with our immigration to Germany.

Conveyor Belts as Sole Leather

Our conveyor belts were 120 cm wide and 150 meters long. They were up to 3 cm⁵⁷ thick and had a rubber layer of 7 mm⁵⁸ on top and a layer of that of 5mm⁵⁹ underneath. Nothing lasts forever and so the conveyor belts also broke sometimes and had to be repaired or completely replaced. That was a godsend for us. The belts lay next to the machine at which I worked, but the rollers were always bolted when they came to us. When the conveyor belts were repaired or replaced, now and then we were even able to cut something off for ourselves because this work was done by our mechanic. Especially when a conveyor belt was completely replaced and cut into pieces, the mechanic also let us cut off something from it.

One was able to make the best soles out of the leather. We sold these for good money; there were enough customers for that. The father of an intimate colleague worked in the factory cobbler’s shop which was not far from my workplace. With

⁵⁶ Хороший

⁵⁷ 1.2 in

⁵⁸ 0.28 in

⁵⁹ 0.20 in

previously made patterns and measurement, we made sole leather out of the carried-off pieces of the conveyor belts taken out of service and took a lot of material out of the factory. I say *we* because we also created the soles for the mechanic and other Russians from the factory.

The smuggling of soles was really dangerous for the Russians. Because when they were frisked and searched at the exit gate of the factory and one found soles or else a stolen article with them, they were immediately put into a prisoner camp. Nearly everybody had already landed there and they were very afraid of that. In comparison, not very much could happen to us. If one caught us with stolen goods, we were locked up for three nights and had to work during the day. In the time while we were locked up, we got nothing to eat. We were locked up only at night, however, and we got nothing to eat at night anyway; therefore, this additional punishment actually did not concern us.

I had to go through this procedure only three times, always because of the soled with which I was caught at the exit gate. Nevertheless, I got through quite frequently and was not caught. We had always seen to it that there were never more than three pairs of soles. Otherwise, the punishment would have turned out considerably heavier. We would have been stood in front of a court and one would have convicted and been able to transfer us to a stricter camp.

Burial of the Deceased

After our 8-hour shifts, we had 48 hours free. The camp administration knew that and during the free time called us in for various jobs in the camp. It happened that we had to bury the deceased; in the course of this, we were a work group of four boys for the most part. The cemetery lay on a very stony ground so that the work was already hard enough. It was especially bad in winter when the soil was frozen hard. It happened at times that we had to work for hours with wedges and with the five-kilo hammer to dig just once a hole in the rock-hard earth into which one was able to put the dead person and cover with some soil or even with frozen snow. When the earth was thawed in spring, the dead people were taken out again and the graves deepened. Sometimes, we already tried in summer to prepare graves for winter but that also did not produce much because the graves caved in due to the rain and the frost following after that and froze over again.

The Wallet

I went once again in my dusty work clothes, which looked like those of a miller, to the meal. Before I went into the canteen, I shook the dust from my jacket and in the process my wallet fell out without my noticing it. When I looked for the wallet, it was gone, together with the few rubles which I had and the remembrance photos from home. After a long time, some women saw the photos in the hands of Russian children who were playing on the wayside with them. The women recognized me on the pictures and brought them back to me, unfortunately with the wallet about which I was very sorry.

The boy mentioned from Matscha—incidentally, his name was *Martin Freisinger*—had sympathy for me because of my loss. He was only born in January 1929 and therefore the youngest person in the nickel factory. In 1947, he was

transferred to a mining camp; after breaking his heel, he went from one hospital to the other. When he finally came home in March 1951, he found only his mother and his brothers and sisters. His father had died in Russia. After two years at home, he went to the Romanian military for three years where he had to work in a quarry.

This Martin comforted me and promised me help. This offer of help, from one who had nothing himself, I found touching. But the boy helped me in fact and even today I still remember it with pleasure. One day, he brought me a good piece of leather in the camp and said to me that I would get a wallet again from it. When I asked him where the leather came from, he evaded me. I wanted to know, however, because I had a definite hunch. After that, he said, "Oh, Sepp⁶⁰ the boots wee really too small for me." But I said to him, "All the same, Matz, you would have been able to sell the boots!" However, Matz (as one called him) did not abandon his plan and made me a wallet, even one with several compartments. I still had this wallet when we immigrated to Germany but unfortunately it got lost sometime. That the boots were too small for Matz, I believe him because he had grown a lot in two years. But he would have been able to sell them. How can one forget something like that? Both of us became good friends.

Fallen Asleep at the Factory Gate

After every shift, we handed in the dirty work clothes in the dressing room and went to take a shower. After that, we received clean clothes from the dressing room woman, got dressed and waited until the women were finished. With these, it took longer for the most part than with us since they still had laundry to wash at the same time. We waited for them because we had to go as a body out the factory gate to be counted.

Once, I was finished earlier than the others again with showering again and, since the weather was so nice, I went ahead right up to the factory gate. There, I lay down on a meadow beside the factory gate and fell sound asleep because there really were no bugs here. The brigade came to the exit gate without me. Probably, the grass was too high because nobody had seen me lying there. When one from the brigade was missing, there had to be phone calls from the sentry at the factory gate to the camp and back again and the brigade had to wait. Finally, they were allowed to go without me.

When I awoke, the sun no longer stood so high and I knew that they were already gone. I ran to the gate right away and explained to the guard what had happened. I had to show him the place where I had fallen asleep. Then, I went back with him and there were phone calls again. I had to wait for the next brigade which took me along to the camp. There, I was immediately sent to jail for a night and on the next morning I was sent to work without eating. But we still went to eat before the shift. At that time, I had already been locked up for the second time; altogether, I had been locked up for punishment five times.

Washing Laundry⁶¹ and Sewing

⁶⁰ A nickname for Josef

⁶¹ The word Wäsche also means underwear in German

One day when we were at the showers again, I wanted also to wash my shirt and underpants. Normally, we had to do that without soap. For that, we placed shirt and underpants under the shower so that the worst dirt was washed off. Then we lathered ourselves with what little soap we had and danced around on our laundry while washing off until it was somewhat clean.

Once, I wanted to clean the laundry better and took a handful of white powder from a barrel which stood beside the bath. I assumed it would be washing soda.⁶² I, therefore, strewed the powder on the laundry and danced around on it while I scrubbed myself. In fact, the laundry became completely clean and snow-white during this process but when I wanted to hang it up it tore apart. That is, it was burned because the snow-white powder was chlorine.⁶³ I had been so glad to have a nice new shirt at last. I had intended to lay the nice shirt aside and in the future to wear my old one for work but it was not supposed to be and now tears welled up in my eyes over my inexperience.

For the most part, we ran around with old, patched things. Sewing was difficult for me in the beginning, but with time it went better and better. The women and girls from Glogowatz often offered to sew my clothes for me. But I was ashamed to give my old things, which had been patched many times, to the women and I hardly had new ones. To be exact, it was such that we had to sell our underwear and shoes to survive and not to die of hunger. Therefore, patch went on patch and still another on top of that.

Birthday Celebration

One day, when I had to put the machines in good condition during the start of the shift, it was very quiet at my workplace and I went below to the two Russian girls at the conveyor belts. They had already waited for me and suddenly leaped for me. Before I knew what was happening, they pulled me around until I lay on the floor. Then they grabbed me by my hands and feet, swung me around in a circle and at the same time sang me a Russian birthday serenade.

I was very surprised and was glad that they had thought of my twentieth birthday. The mechanic and the master even came to this rejoicing and likewise congratulated me on my birthday. Thus, I celebrated my 20th birthday on the border between Europe and Asia, 4500 km⁶⁴ from home and became richer again by an experience.

Wages and Use

In August 1947, therefore 28 months after my entry in the camp of Orsk, I got my first wages paid out. Beforehand, it was kept back from me because of the debts which I had incurred due to my accident. Since I was not at all used to going around with money, I simply wanted to give it to my Cousin Adam who two years before had always looked after me. But Cousin Adam declined it categorically, even to accept just one ruble. That had moved me a lot and I am eternally grateful to him. He advised me to buy new clothes, a suit, a shirt, a cap perhaps even shoes with the money. I already would have wanted to do that for a long time, but how was one

⁶² Hydrated sodium carbonate, Na₂CO₃·10H₂O

⁶³ Most likely bleaching powder, a mixture of calcium hydroxide, chloride and hypochlorite

⁶⁴ 2800 mi

supposed to buy himself anything behind the barbed wire? I was lucky; previous supplies of the military police were brought into the camp, which we were able to buy. After a discussion with Cousin Adam, I bought a suit, a nice shirt, a cap and a pair of woolen gloves, which I urgently needed for my damaged fingers, from my first wages.

It was a joy when I saw myself in the new outfit in the mirror the first time. Of course, the eagle and military rank had been removed from the suit. Finally, I was able to wear something other than the padded clothing. There still is a photo of this suit in the family album.

Cousin Adam asked me himself then when I already got my wages whether I would have enough money. He was always ready to give me something but thank God I no longer needed it. Sometimes, I even loaned some money for a few days. Two colleagues from our brigade—one of them was my friend Matz—often borrowed small sums from me. They also received a wage of course, but it often was not sufficient for them.

Between Christmas and New Year, the money in Russia was exchanged 10:1. I had saved some money and would still have been able to live off it a long time but now I no longer got pleasure with it. Certainly, the money exchange did bring us an advantage: For a while, as much as one wanted could be purchased from all the goods in the canteen storeroom, i.e. bread, oil, sugar, yes even sausages, and at the same time the prices were 10:1. When was there that before!

12. Finally We Set Off for Home

It Should Become True

Already soon after the end of the war, “skoro domoi”⁶⁵ (soon home) was promised to us but it remained among the empty promises. This did not stop resounding in our ears since all of us had hoped to be allowed to return to the homeland.

In the third autumn, medical transports were put together again. Because of my accident, I was always called in front of the medical commission. But since in the last weeks I had also bought food from my wages and eaten better, one was able to see that happening to me again. I was discharged with the remark, “otschen charascho”⁶⁶ (everything very well) and remained furthermore in Camp Number 1902.

But finally the time had really come. One day at the start of June 1948 when we came back from work, all the camp inmates were already packing bags. Our entire possessions fit in one single suitcase. We were taken back to the main camp of Orsk where we learned that our great longing (“skoro domoi”), therefore to go home soon, now was supposed to be fulfilled. Because of that, one had dismissed us from our usual workplaces four months before. At that time, one had already begun to put together the medical transport and meanwhile everyone who was in the camp of Mednogorst had all traveled home by this medical transport.

I was now already there the fourth time; who was still able to believe that the dream will come true this time? Too often, was “skoro domoi” said to us in the three

⁶⁵ Скоро домой

⁶⁶ Очень хорошо

and a half years, I had lived through the commissions many times and again and again was left behind anyway. This time, it was serious; too many were there now, almost half of the camp. Nevertheless, I was not able to get rid of the mistrust completely. I received the definite guarantee from the examination of the medical commission. Here, my fingers were inspected, my body examined and one discharged me with, "domoi." I slowly began to prepare myself for that.

Then when things were ready, Cousin Adam asked me whether I still had enough money. Unfortunately, I had to confess to him that I did not have any more. We had no longer received wages on the construction site and my payment had also been reduced because the Russian, whom I had to introduce, was already there. It was, therefore, five months since I had received my last wages. Cousin Adam, however, comforted and assured me that he still would have so much that both of us would be able to reach as far as home.

Travel Preparations and Farewell

Now, a lot of excitement about going on a trip had broken out in the camp. Everything was prepared for the trip home, even the freight cars were supposed to be decorated with green branches. We were allowed to travel to the Ural River situated nearby by big trucks and fetch greenery; that became a nice and exciting trip. After that, every car was decorated with green foliage and in between came posters with sayings of praise and thanks, even with good wishes for our trip home and our families. What a great difference it was between these decorated freight cars of today and those of three and a half years before when one wanted to punish us because we had stripped wood from the inside walls and used it as fuel in order not to freeze.

The parting from the fellow workers and friends staying behind became very difficult for us; quite frequently in three years, I had certainly experience and suffered it myself. At the end, I sent a greeting and sincere thanks to my old master along with the girls from my first workplace in addition. Two of my friends, my best friend Matz as well, still owed me money. I no longer wanted to accept that, even if now I did not have any more. In exchange, a Lugoscher friend presented me a hairbrush which I saved until my emigration from Glogowatz. Of course, I had received and carefully kept a wallet from Matz.

We Actually Set Off

We were again shipped in freight cars with plank beds but this time the cars were not locked up. That was already something special for us since we were trapped behind barbed wire three and a half years. In addition, it was already quite warm and one was constantly able to keep the car doors open. Guards with rifles were also there on the return trip but not as many and more for our protection.

The departure from Orsk took place on the 22nd of June 1948 at one o'clock AM. The work sirens howled and the inhabitants of Orsk said goodbye to us at the railroad station with brass band music. In spite of everything that had happened, we found this farewell very touching, for which we have Mr. *Melnikov*, our camp commandant, to thank. I had already reported nice things about him, in contrast to the former commandant who often had tormented us.

First, the trip went to Reditjanga where the neighboring Camp Number 1901 was

situated. Here, a few cars were coupled on, into which the Banater compatriots were loaded; even a few Glogowatzers were there. Then the trip went on to Orenburg where prisoners of war coming from Siberia were added to the transport. Now, we traveled on in the direction of the Volga River. Here, there were almost only forests to see. When we approached the Volga on a high railroad embankment, we saw a sea of garden plot holders on both sides of the river. The pretty picture made us feel sad because we saw, at the same time, the many watchtowers on the outskirts of the city in which armed soldiers supervised the prisoners.

We Have to Eat and Are Deloused

Our camp commandant frequently went through the train, asked about our condition and always told us when we would stop a longer time in a station so that we were able to purchase bread, margarine or something else for us to eat. The Russian population let us go first in the shop so that we were quickly able to purchase something and get back on time. In the train, we were organized according to the alphabet. And since my first letter W (from Walitschek) is written in Russian like our B, I was in one of the first cars of our long train. We were also allowed to visit passengers in other cars but one had to give information in the car exactly where one will be.

Thus, the trip went thousands of kilometers in brilliant sunshine which fell in through the opened doors. The morale was good and beautiful homeland songs rang out. On the way, we received a warm meal daily. The cook of the train was a Glogowatzer woman who had also worked in the kitchen in our camp 1901.

At the departure, there were instructions to us not to leave the train without knowing how long it will stop. This time, it certainly did not happen because nobody wanted to be left behind. All of us were happy that we finally were traveling home. In the vicinity of Charkow,⁶⁷ we stopped 24 hours. There, we were able to take showers and also our clothes were deloused.

Border Crossing to Romania

In our train, a blind passenger, an escaped prisoner of war, traveled with. Since only one sentry and the camp commandant handled the supervision over the entire train, the prisoner of war was able to hide easily and was not discovered.

On the 9th of July 1948, we crossed the Dniester River near Tighina⁶⁸ where the border between Moldavia and Romania lay. On went the trip to Focșani (**Romania**) where a camp for Russian and later German prisoners of war was situated during the war. There, we were put up in a barracks for a day and after that handed over by our trip leader to the Romanian authorities. We still got bread and soup in the future but now also *mămăligă* (corn meal mush) to eat. With it, there were small fishes which we ate up even though they were salted too much. It did not go well with me after that and I had to drink a whole lot of water.

Discharge

⁶⁷ Kharkov, Ukraine

⁶⁸ Near Tiraspol, Moldova

Before the trip home continued, we had to take part in a meeting. In the course of this, a speech of our camp commandant was slowly and clearly translated for us. He explained to us again why we had been taken to Russia. He thanked us for our construction work, wished us and our families everything good and best of health. At the same time, he urged us to eat slowly and be careful since many of us were undernourished and sick as well. We applauded and took our leave from the Russian delegation.

From the Russian authorities, we received the tickets for the trip home and some money. With that, we were—the first time after such a long time—left to our own devices. It was a beautiful feeling to be free again after one was accustomed to being always guarded and observed.

Pleasant Trip Home

At the railroad station, we boarded our train but this time no longer in stock cars with plank beds but as people in passenger cars. The trip went in the direction of Kronstadt (Braşova) and Hermannstadt (Sibiu). At one of the next larger stations, a few women boarded the train to sell victuals. Since the articles looked so appetizing and also smelled good, I bought a pastry made from cornmeal (mălai) and ate it up immediately. After that, I felt bloated and had to lie down on my seat. All the way home, I was able to eat nothing more at all. Later, a woman came onto the train who sold schnapps. I bought a small glass and I thereby got better.

Arrival

When we passed Maria Radna, our native place of pilgrimage, soon after that, we sang hymns in praise of Mary in all the cars and rejoiced in a view of the pilgrimage church. We came to known villages, hills and fields closer and closer to the homeland and each of us sent a prayer of thanks to heaven. Everything now went so quickly that we were not able at all to follow along with our thoughts. Then when we arrived in Glogowatz, the “domoi” promised a thousand times and longed for so long finally became reality. Everybody was already awaited at the railroad station. Father had come with horse and wagon. He greeted me and embraced me. We loaded my baggage and that of others until the wagon was full and went home on foot.

The entire village greeted us warmly. Many people stood in the streets since they indeed knew a transport would again arrive on this day. It was the twelfth of July 1948. In front of our house stood mother, grandfather, grandmother and all the neighbors on the street. The joy over our return home was great but the home which we found here was no longer the old one for a long time.

Because now strange people looked out of the windows of the two front rooms and the farmers had to make do with the summer kitchen. Indeed, they even often slept in a room which they had made out of a relinquished stall right next to the domestic animals.

A Strange World

While we were in Russia three and a half years, one had dispossessed all the Germans and put colonists into their houses. The former owners had to share

everything with them: the shed, the barn, all the stalls, the cellar, attic and the backyard, yes even the house garden. Only one room, the kitchen and the summer kitchen which was built onto the shed were left to us. The situation was especially bad when I got married in 1950. We newly married people lived only in the room, however father and mother slept and lived in the kitchen. Grandfather and grandmother slept for a few years—even in winter—in the summer kitchen which was not suitable for that at all. And what would have been if I would have had still younger brothers and sisters as was often the case in larger families? But who ever asked about that? Often there were squabbles with the colonists.

13. Life Goes On

Life now was different from before and in spite of everything it had to go on somehow. We again met our comrades who were left at home; new ones joined so that our circle of comrades contained more than twenty boys then. We celebrated with the comrades—as best we even could—the happy homecoming from the abduction. I would have liked to make up what I had missed and enjoy myself but due to the years lost in Russia I was now at the age of 21 years, already too old for it. We celebrated nevertheless even as things were.

Rivalries with the Colonist Boys

Of course, entertainment no longer was the way the young people organized it before the war, because even during the dances, the colonists were there and there always friction which degenerated into scraps. The cause of this quarreling always was that the Germans wanted to hear their pieces of music and also the Romanians theirs. The band, however, was filled only with Germans who now also had to play Romanian pieces of music. Often there was an argument because of the girls as well. For instance, when one danced with a German girl and a colonist boy likewise wanted to dance with her. Sometimes, it went well but then it became too much for one and the argument began.

At the grapes ball,⁶⁹ a Romanian guy came and wanted to have the girl with whom I was dancing just then. I had seen that he had already done that repeatedly, did not agree with that and turned him down. For that, I received a box on the ear. Immediately, we were circled by my comrades and those of the Romanian boy; it looked like a fight again. But I asked everyone to keep calm. I had indeed already taken a box on the ear and now only wanted that the musicians continued playing and we were able to continue dancing. And it turned out like that, too. The feelings cooled down and the dance went on peacefully.

When I encountered this boy later, he always greeted me pleasantly and I no longer had other problems with him and the other colonist boys.

There Is Celebrating Again

In autumn 1948, the grapes and (Saint) Catherine⁷⁰ balls took place. We also celebrated (Saint) Barbara (4th December) with a dance, pastries and wine in a house

⁶⁹ A ball after the grape harvest at which the venue was decorated with grapevines and grapes

⁷⁰ Around November 25

on the Brettergasse⁷¹ (Str. Reformei). Thus, time went by; Christmas came and after that came New Year 1949. We celebrated New Year's Eve—more than 20 comrades and many girls as well—in a spacious carpenter's workshop. At midnight, we set out to bring the New Year's greeting to all the relatives and friends with musical accompaniment by ten o'clock in the morning. At that time, not much was organized at Shrovetide.

We celebrated the Josef name day (19th March) among ourselves in the year 1949. In our fellowship, there were three Josefs, and more than 20 guys from six age groups met. We found enough space in the big shed. Father had acquired wine from Paulisch⁷² which still came from a prewar vintage. In wartime, it was pressed well and was so strong that many got tipsy. There still are pictures from this nice celebration on many photo albums.

Then came our church consecration festival on the 16th of May (St. John of Nepomuk⁷³), in which I also participated. It really was an experience to hold a real kermis again on the big square in front of the church after an eight-year interruption. It was also recorded on photos. After the kermis followed Pentecost and this time I was also among the Pentecost riders.⁷⁴ It was a beautiful experience when we rode to the village administrators, to the pastor, to the parents and to the girl of every boy and in that way showed honor to them.

At this time, it was difficult to get permission for entertainments, but the volunteer fire brigade had always looked after that and received the approval. So as earlier, the kermis boys had organized the Pentecost riding and the other entertainments in the name of the fire brigade. It went on like this until I got married in 1950.

14. New Occupations

Field Work as a Smallholder

Business life at this time was difficult. Aside from the colonists in the house, we had nothing more: no field, no livestock, the attic, the cellar and the shed were empty. In the stable, we still had only the small horse which the Russian soldiers had left behind instead of the chestnut gelding taken with. The foal, whose mother the Hungarian soldiers had taken along during their retreat so that we had to give it the milk bottles, had become a fine, strong horse at the age of four years. And one cow was also still left to us.

Grandfather loved the small Russian horse and also the light wagon. He worked in the young woods where indeed corn was still planted between the small trees and we helped him at the same time. But grandfather also traveled twice a day into the woods to acquire grass for the horses and the cow and now and then he also brought along firewood as fuel.

Father worked at this time in Paulisch at the quarry. There, the foothills of the

⁷¹ Boards Street

⁷² Păuliș, 10 miles ESE of Glogowatz

⁷³ Patron saint of the parish

⁷⁴ The single young men decorated their horses and rode visiting

West Carpathians, the “Gebirich”⁷⁵ as we called this chain of hills, already began. The workers there were not permanently taken on so that he did not have to go to work every day. Therefore, he was still able to carry out field work on the side. The expropriated field was able to be leased from the new owner and cultivated for a fourth of the harvest. My father indeed still owned one horse, and together with a two-in-hand⁷⁶ we were able to cultivate plow field even for half of the harvest yield. When after months I had gotten my strength back, I mostly carried out this work with someone else’s two-in-hand. In the process, we worked in twos and during the corn harvest father and mother were there, too.

In late summer 1949, there was an accident in our stable. One night, a horse of the colonist broke free and there was a fight with our horse which got a strong kick on the kneecap. The injury was so severe that even veterinary treatment for months remained unsuccessful. When we no longer were able to watch how the poor animal lay in the hammock and was in an agony of pain, we had to help it die. That was a heavy blow especially for me because now without a two-in-hand I no longer was able to work in the field.

Factory Work in Arad

Already at the start of 1949, I had gone to the work chamber (employment exchange) to get a job. But it was not easy to find a job. For that, one had to have the right connections, i.e. a confidant who put in a good word for one. Once, an invitation to an interview in the tobacco factory was sent to me and other applicants but only a few were taken on as a result of that. I was not accepted on the basis of my damaged fingers, but I doubt that this was the real reason for rejection.

After I no longer was able to work in the field without our horse, I quite frequently applied at the work chamber. One day, I was lucky, but it came from another quarter. A comrade had a friend in the Arader freight car factory who promised me and a friend to put in a good word for us so that one would engage us in the factory. Thus it happened that on the 3rd of November 1949, we were taken on in the freight car factory.

In autumn 1949, the rest of the abductees came home from Russia and many of them, above all boys and men, were immediately taken on in heavy industry. Together with me, still more workers were there. With my friend and a boy just returned home, I was employed in the first metalworker department. Our job involved nickel-plating some metal like iron, copper and brass. Before the nickel-plating, the metal was cleaned in the grinding machine during which a lot of dust and dirt was produced. The work was not hard but one had to deal with the machines carefully. Since the end of the year was quite close and the output target on automobiles had to be fulfilled, we worked in two shifts, twelve hours daily and six hours on Sunday, in the course of which our wages were quite high.

Then when the plan was fulfilled, several workers from the nickel works were transferred to other departments after New Year. I also went into the pipe department of the first metalworking shop, where two inch long pipes were bent according to patterns with charcoal fire and then mounted on the floor of the car. At the same

⁷⁵ Glogowatzer dialect for “Gebirge”—mountains

⁷⁶ A plow rig with two horses hitched together

time, I was trained in a metalworking course lasting six months (two hours each time in the morning before work). The morale among the fellow workers was not especially good because in many brigades Hungarian was principally spoken. Non-Hungarians were excluded.

In summer, I was again transferred because there no longer was a much work with the pipe brigade. There were more freight cars built, for which fewer pipes were needed. So, I went to the second metalworking shop, where the morale among the colleagues was much better. We mostly worked in twos, sometimes also in fours, since the material installed was very heavy. Quite frequently, we worked in the open air since at that time there were no correspondingly large sheds for this assembly work.

Conscriptions

In March 1950, I received the first call-up to the Romanian military. For many, that meant: five years of heaviest construction work in Russian camps, only a few months at home and then three years of military service again; therefore, eight years away from home: What a dreadful fate for 17 to 23 year old boys. The conscripts of the freight car factory always went as a body and accompanied from the factory to the city military center. Right from the start, our escort always succeeded in getting all of us free, but it only lasted a few months until the next call-up came. A few boys always had to report for duty and after a year almost all the comrades called-up were gone. Within three years, I had received more than ten call-ups but because of my fingers I was always exempted from military service. Then in 1950, I finished the metalworking course and work went on normally.

15. Late Effects of the Abduction

The heavy labor lasting for years with inadequate and unbalanced nutrition, Siberian cold, deficient hygiene and absolutely inadequate medical treatment in connection with the numerous illnesses and work accidents, in addition the constant guarding in the camp and during the work, the brutal treatment by many supervisors and the permanent emotional stress due to the separation from the homeland, from relatives and friends to whom every contact was broken off, led among many abductees to severe physical and mental strains, for which consideration was hardly shown. Victims were not rare, although those seriously ill and unfit for work were already sent home by special transports in the first year. Josef, along with other sick people, often had to dig graves for the deceased, which with the hard-frozen ground in winter was almost impossible, as already could be read.

The power of resistance in the exhausted bodies was too low to ward off illnesses; it often led to illnesses of the digestive system, to chronic rheumatism, arthritis and other troubles, of which the affected people not rarely had to suffer their entire lives. Not rarely, the consequences of the abduction led to disability and even premature death. The fate of our compatriot Josef Walitschek, whose memoirs are presented here in a form tightened by me, stands in place of the experiences of many of our fellow sufferers.

I had—like all the comrades—lost weight and came home weak and needed a long time to recover. I followed the piece of advice by our camp commandant during the discharge to be careful with food, to begin with light fare and only to change to stronger food slowly. So, things already went much better for me by autumn.

Late Effects of Dysentery

I had, during the forced labor in the camp in Orsk in 1902, had dysentery (diarrhea with blood), like many others, due to the inadequate and bad food and received no treatment for it; at that time there were no medicines at all. Therefore, I had to help myself with charcoal which I swallowed with a leaf or once with a slice of sausage. That kept me alive but the effects appeared after years, in 1950 and after that: my gastric acid was gone. Too much gastric acid harms the stomach, and if one has none the small intestine suffers because instead of proper digestion only a fermentation process takes place with bad health effects.

My colleagues in the freight car factory had sympathy for my troubles. But because of the heavy work, I was not able to take care of myself. After a few weeks, it could go on no longer. I had to go to a doctor, got some medical leave first and after that was admitted to the hospital. After the discharge, I was no longer able to return to my job. I got an easier job at the metalworking workbench but soon nothing more went on with the great heat. The diarrhea became worse and worse so that I lost eighteen kilograms⁷⁷ within five months and went to the hospital again. There was no improvement this time either but one had diagnosed that I had no gastric acid so that my digestive process was systematically disrupted. I received a lot of medicines, tablets and syrups to replace my gastric acid, but everything was unsuccessful. From 1951 to 1954, I was in the Arader hospital eight times and in the Temeswarer hospital twice. Between the internments, one always gave me light work, as a temporary worker in bookkeeping and as an errand boy. The assignment as a crane operator was a mistake because I often had to leave the crane unoccupied and that really could not be done.

I remained in the hospital for three to four weeks each time during which analyses and X-ray examinations were made. One also wanted to operate from the stomach to the small intestine but I rejected that. Because of that, I received no medical leave in the future, had to go to private doctors and pay for the medicines myself. In the factory, I got an easy job in a screw storeroom. There, I was able to eat when and what I wanted but I certainly was able to eat only fare easy to digest.

So it went on with the light diet and whole wheat bread and I indeed felt better. According to advice in the *Kneipp-Naturkundeheilbuch*⁷⁸ and the suggestions of several doctors, I lived with whole wheat bread, bran and a glass of red wine at every meal. It was not easy, however, because I often had relapses. As of 1959, I was in water cure places, which helped my digestive problems, every year. I no longer was in hospitals because I had enough of them. Instead, I tried to help myself. Of course, it took time; decades went by until everything settled halfway down.

⁷⁷ 40 pounds

⁷⁸ *Natural Science Medicinal Book*; Fr. Sebastian Kneipp, a father of the Natural Cure movement; advocated hydrotherapy, diet and rest

Young Medical Pensioner

Finally, I presented myself to the commission for medical pension. On the basis of my discharge certificate from the hospital and all the medical reports, I was moved to medical pension second degree with one year's duration and without any right to work. With it, I received a meager pension and was discontented with my situation.

It was not easy for me at such a young age to remain idle at home. Once on Saturday, I swept the yard and heard the workers, who were coming from the early shift, on the street. I looked through the cracks in the wooden fence and saw my comrades on the way home from work. I thought to myself how nice it really would be if today I had gone to work and also tomorrow, on Sunday, I would be able to go to work.

Time went by like that and I recovered more from year to year. It certainly was not easy because after six years of continuous diarrhea I needed six years again to recover and to put on again the 18 kg which I had taken off. But after that, the worst was overcome.

In autumn 1962, I had to go before the doctors' commission again to apply for an extension of my medical pension. I would have liked to work again, but how was I supposed to manage that? Beforehand, one had advised me against simply stepping in front of the commission and saying that I would like to work. Later on, I would have been able to get relapses again and then it would have been over with the work again. Therefore, I had to behave so that the commission would come to the conclusion by itself to classify me in medical pension third degree. I was successful in that as well and now I had some right to work again.

Again at Work

In spring 1963, I tried to start again in the factory where I had a job in a screw storeroom. In the years in which I was home, a lot had changed there and many new workers were engaged. For that reason, I now went to the tool storeroom where there was work in three shifts. That was a disadvantage in my particular situation. I still had to be careful with food and pay a lot of attention to when, how and especially what I ate.

A colleague was helpful to me when I went for an interview with the factory leaders. I was still known to many since before my medical pension I had worked for years in the screw storeroom. I received a position and became storeroom leader with five assistants in a tool storeroom. Here, the work was indeed in three shifts but as storeroom leader I only went to the early shift. I also wanted it precisely provided that I was able to eat in general because that way I was able to eat when and what I wanted. At the workplace, I was also able to warm up food brought along and cook tea or coffee. That actually was not allowed in the tool storeroom but there was a corner where one was able to do that. This provision especially was beneficial to me in my situation at that time because through it the question of eating was resolved for me.

I needed about two years until we had set up the entire tool storeroom according to my ideas. I was very pleased with my work and thanked the colleagues for the help in this period. I even led the storeroom twenty years up to my immigration to Germany. In this period, I was no longer in the hospital and also needed no medical

leave. When things did not go well for me, I remained home on a few free days. On Sundays, somebody else looked after the work anyway.

Conclusion

In this period, I still learned a thing or two from the Kneipp-Naturheilkundebuch⁷⁹ and continued my self-treatment. Thus, I no longer was dependent on hospitals and doctors. The effects of my abduction to the Ural River, from which I especially suffered in the years 1951-1963, I would not like to go through again. I have survived this bad period but I cannot forget it my whole life.

16. My Life-Story

Forty years after my homecoming from Russia, I decided to write down my life story for my descendants and all the other readers.

The largest part of my reminiscences takes place during the war and the postwar years. This period was characterized by disaster, humiliation and death as a result of abduction, expulsion and expropriation. Two headlines are suitable for this period: “We were the youngest at the abduction” and “Messed-up years of youth.” That is the story of my life. Now I ask myself: Why were we boys and girls especially hit so hard? What were we blamed for that we had to get through all of that?

We grew up in a self-contained village community and only rarely got out of this village of Glogowatz in the northern Banat, now and then to the 7 km⁸⁰ distant district city of Arad and once a year to the 21 km⁸¹ distant pilgrimage place Maria Radna. And at the age of 17 years, I along with many others was abducted to Siberia, to a camp of Orsk in the Ural Mountains, from which many no longer came back. The father of my wife died in an accident in a coalmine on the 9th of July 1946; two of his daughters were abducted at the ages of 19 or 21 years and with heavy labor and insufficient food broke down physically and mentally in the end. On the 30th of March and the 13th of April 1947, they died in the same camp; three relatives of my family and how many families would not be able to report something similar? I wonder whether crosses or graves can still be seen there. I do not think so because surely grass has grown over them and one no longer speaks of them.

Despite his terrible experiences, Josef Walitschek has been given humaneness and sympathy out of his parental home and continued to evolve abroad during the threat lasting for years to his health and of his life. His true human dimension shows itself in the respect that no outrages whatever speak from his reminiscences but rather understanding of his tormenters, who indeed mostly only carried out orders. On the other hand, he omits no opportunity to bring to light human kindness and assistance on the part of the supervisory staff and of his companions and for that are to be thanked with warm words. When one considers that the young Josef was not touched by death only one time, the accident with his hand and the catastrophic treatment, various illnesses and the

⁷⁹ Nature Healing Book

⁸⁰ 4.4 mi

⁸¹ 13 mi

walk back to the camp through the icy snowstorm only survived due to strokes of good luck and even was often forced to dig graves in the frozen soil of Siberia for deceased comrades, then his deeply human and Christian approach to life cannot be evaluated high enough.

And this basic position can also be recognized later. After he along with his family had been driven to the rear auxiliary dwelling of his parental home by a colonist family which had moved in, after he finally had been boxed on the ear by a colonist boy because of a girl, he summons up the spiritual dimension to avert a brawl while he calms the irritated German and Romanian boys and the dance continues. His adversary later thanks him by his friendly greeting. The Russian master in the nickel works—likewise abducted from home—who recognizes Josef's honest character looks at him almost like his own son and even invites him home for a meal although he along with his large family is also starving, behaves similarly. And the abductees dancing in their padded clothes in the assembly hall of the well-guarded Work Camp 1902 are the ones who made the camp commandant smile. He also will accompany those released up to Focșani and before the hand-over to the Romanian authorities say goodbye with a personal speech. There, understanding and kindness on both sides become apparent.

And especially those are forward-looking qualities similar to the essential features of the "Charta der deutschen Heimatvertriebenen".⁸² These cannot forget their expulsion and the injustice suffered, however forgive and they extend their hand to the enemies for reconciliation. That way, individuals like our abductees and all the Germans expelled lay down the bases for a good life together in a united Europe and in a future globalized world in which the same human rights must also belong to the poorest as to the privileged and powerful. Many peoples and politicians still today could learn from this exemplary attitude so that our world would become more peaceful and humane.

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Footnotes are comments of the translator; some short notes are red in the text.

⁸² Charter of the German Displaced Persons