The Story of Franz Bäumer’s Wartime Emergency Landing in Grossliebental (Ukraine), Circa Early 1944

By Edgar Seibel of Hallenberg, Germany

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GRHS Heritage Review Editor’s Note: Edgar Seibel of Hallenberg, Germany, is a young, up-and-coming author of Volga German heritage who moved from Russia with his family to Germany in 1998. An informative German-language newspaper article link about Edgar, his family background, and his writing career can be found at: http://www.derwesten.de/kultur/wenn-wurzeln-keinen-halt-finden-id7565780.html (accessed 18 May 2016). The English translation of the newspaper article is found at: https://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/articles/newspapers/news/german_newspaper_articles/seibel.html (accessed 18 May 2016). A short Wikipedia entry on Edgar in German is also available at: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_Seibel (accessed 18 May 2016). In recent years, Edgar has been investigating the fate of the Volga Germans. We thank him for contributing to Heritage Review.

Edgar Seibel’s Introduction: I held conversations in August 2010 with Günter-Franz Bäumer (1923-2012) of Hallenberg in the Hochsauerlandkreis in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, writing down some of his life stories before his passing in April 2012. He was our family’s former landlord and neighbor from 1998, the year of our entry into the Federal Republic of Germany, until 2002.

Bäumer told me about the ethnic German settlers of Grossliebental (today Velikodolinskoye) in Ukraine. During the Second World War, he had to make an emergency landing with his transport plane in the Black Sea area. Germany had already known of the ethnic Germans (“Volksdeutsche”) residing in Ukraine. The story went that he landed his aircraft filled with wounded soldiers directly into this colony. He explained how the ethnic Germans gave him provisions (bread and much bacon). He had to hurry, however, because Red Army troops were only thirty kilometers away from him. The wintry ground conditions at the time kept the plane grounded, but Grossliebental’s local German population helped him with “horses and boards” to break the aircraft out from the ice.

The full conversation can be found in a report which I entitled Fritz Müller – die Ruhrjungen (Fritz Müller – The Ruhr Boys), which includes the life of Franz Bäumer. Conversations were recorded on a dictation machine. In addition, Bäumer’s report on Grossliebental appears in my last book called Volksgruppe – Unbekannt (Ethnic Group Unknown), which portrays both the life of Russian Germans and explanations about this ethnic people, as well as the “ordeals” of my own family.

At the age of ten in 1933, Franz Bäumer was supposed to join the Hitler Youth (Hitlerjugend or HJ). His father, a member of the German Catholic Center Party, prevented his son’s early induction through good networking. Franz initially remained an altar boy and member of the youth group of the Catholic parish church. Yet he ultimately ended up with the Hitler Youth. He learned the printer’s trade with relatives in Warendorf in North Rhine-Westphalia, Münsterland.
Bäumer entered into a new apprenticeship at a lodge (Opelhaus) through his father’s contacts. There, he was supposed to be trained as a locksmith. His mentor, evidently of part-Jewish ancestry, left Germany as a result of politics becoming increasingly dangerous; he was supposed to have settled in the Netherlands. Bäumer’s apprenticeship was lost as a result. He then gained a position as a car upholsterer [making or repairing leather equipment] and successfully completed the training.

At the beginning of the Second World War, Bäumer was also called up for duty. Through his vocational training he became now an aircraft upholsterer and found himself in the so-called transport squadron. He had his first flights on the Baltic Sea (“instructional flights”). He never showed nausea symptoms in delicate maneuvers (i.e., training flights with target practice).

During his first missions in Eastern Europe, Bäumer developed a strong case of angina due to the Russian winter of -30 to -40 degrees Celsius. He went to a field hospital.

Bäumer recalled his perilous wartime activities: “During the conflict, I often tried to avoid shooting. I will never forget how our pilots with a maneuver shot at the partisans. A daring action because we were quite vulnerable. With a gun one could have brought our machine to a certain crash! If twenty men would have lain on their backs and hit the tank, everything would have exploded! I shot at the car and at the horses on the ground. I saw the animals standing tall but unharmed. ‘Everything is fine, fly on!’ I exclaimed to the pilots. Always you had to balance between two worlds…”

Bäumer spent his spare time with comrades in Italy (Sicily, Siena, Grosseto, and Pisa).

When I asked him about the Waffen-SS, he remembered: “When the sergeant called out, ‘The first commitment is to the Waffen-SS!’ it was followed by a swift response from the soldiers: ‘Boo!’ Because no one volunteered for the SS. If they were caught, their death was already a foregone conclusion. They were shot when they were captured. Everyone knew that, and each of us could be terribly happy without it…” (Bäumer had landed with paratroopers in these last stages of the war).

Bäumer was finally recognized with a few of his companions on the German-Belgian border by a German-speaking Belgian and handed over to the Allies. He went to a standing cell in which one had to remain thirty days until one became so stiff that the standing as well as sitting was an impossibility.

Then Bäumer came to a prison camp surrounded by barbed wire fences and known for particularly muddy grounds. Among others, Franz Bäumer recalled the imprisonment and the two American interpreters as follows: “In captivity, we had an interpreter, an American, who was a native of Germany. Later, he always brought us oranges and all kinds of things. The other was an American of Polish origin who could speak a little German and also smuggled fruit for us…. But I have to admit that it went terribly in captivity. Many hanged themselves on beams, went mad…. Roll calls were carried out in which one had to stand for hours on end. If someone was actually missing, you could stand until your legs literally felt up inside your body.…”

At the emergency landing in the Odessa Region, in the colony of Grossliebental, Bäumer told the following:
When at a late hour we had to make an emergency landing in Russia during a cold spell, the aircraft dropped us off at the location with the German name of Grossliebental (today Velikodolinskoye) in the Odessa Region along the Black Sea. The place had been founded by German immigrants ... the local population we called ethnic Germans [Volksdeutsche] [Author’s note: Unlike Reichsdeutschen, these people of German culture, language, and ancestry were living outside of Germany’s borders]. They were terribly happy to look at our machine, and I let them in and showed them everything. They were even more astonished when they only became aware of the machine’s vast dimensions. We were in big trouble, because our machine, which had remained literally stuck in the ice, carried wounded, and the Russians were only about thirty kilometers away from us! The ethnic Germans helped us out of the disaster!

They moved the wheels from the ice with shock iron and shovels, placed boards underneath, on either side, as well as in front. Some horses with two pulling ropes to the left and right sides of the animals were fastened to the flying machine. On one of the horses I sat myself. Unfortunately, I tumbled off the old nag by accident. Nevertheless, we were able to place the vehicle on the bar in front of us and pull it out of the frozen ground. The horseback riding had not been my thing, I probably must stress... This went much better for the Grossliebentals than for me. The people of Grossliebental had been friendly, even gave us supplies such as bacon, ham, and much more for the flight.

Many years later in the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1990s I even met a woman from that village at a meeting of the German émigrés from the Odessa Region. And not by chance, I found myself once in the town of Meschede (Hochsauerlandkreis) at an immigration office. I came there in order to help a Russian-German friend named Karl Seibel (born in 1940 in Niedermonjou, Volga German Republic, since 1998 in Germany). The man, on the grounds of his activity in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, though back in the 1970s, was supposed to be expelled from Germany. Finally, I showed the director of the immigration office a photo of Grossliebental, telling of the event in Ukraine and adding: “Madam Director, if these people would not have been there, all the wounded at the time would not have gotten out, and I likewise would have died. We would have all been shot by the Soviets! These people here are Germans, not Russian foreigners! They have returned to their homeland. I am telling you as a soldier of the Second World War.” The director understood and accepted that. She suggested a positive chance for my friend. “We will keep talking,” she said. In the end, my friend was admitted an extended residence permit.

An illustration of Franz Bäumer’s transport plane around 1944.
Bäumer's airplane was the Messerschmitt Me 323 Gigant (Giant) or ME 323. This model represented the largest of Germany’s land-based military transport aircraft used during the Second World War. Utilized primarily by the Luftwaffe (German Air Force), it was in operation from 1943 to 1944. It is determined that only 213 of these aircraft were ever constructed, some of them in fact converted from the ME 321 military gliders.

Luftwaffe pilot Bäumer in Italy, 1943.
Bäumer on home leave in Wattenscheid near Bochum, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, 1943.

The back of the picture reads:

Franz Bäumer
1943-44 Italy
For Konstantin Seibel
– Franz Bäumer

Konstantin is Edgar’s father.
Bäumer’s gravestone. Picture courtesy of author Edgar Seibel.