

Back to the Homeland

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This is how gentlemen ride, this is how ladies ride, and this is how farmers chug along*, but in this case it is our fully laden wagon that rumbles along, and for two weeks already. When we heard that the war had come to an end, we packed our necessary possessions and headed to the West where we assumed the Americans would be. But when we got to the border, the Americans would not let us pass, and what was worse, they handed us over to the Russians who wanted to send us to Siberia because they took us for Germans. After a long dispute, we convinced them that we weren't Germans at all; our papers proved that we were all born in Romania. If that is indeed the case, they told us to turn around and head in the opposite direction. And this is how this terrible trek back to our homeland began, to our village called Caramurat which is located in the Dobrogea, near the Black Sea. Terrible because we were going against the grain, against waves of oncoming Russian battalions. I was 8 years old at the time. Now our goal was back to the homeland! But what awaited us there? When we were resettled by the German Reich in 1940, my grandparents and my parents left everything behind. Just imagine: the horses, the cows, the pigs, the geese, the chickens, everything was left behind. All they could take along was what fit into a few suitcases. My mother told me that her lapdog wouldn't want to leave her; it followed her to the end of the village. She shoed it back again and again until it finally dropped its head and lay down.

Our convoy of about 25 wagons avoided the main streets, moved along on backstreets and often close to forests. But we couldn't totally avoid strafing aircraft. We didn't know whether they were American or Russian airplanes. When they attacked us, we threw ourselves into ditches as fast as possible, shut our ears with both hands and prayed loudly to God for help. I thought it was somehow remarkable that the grownups who seemed so confident otherwise behaved like little

*The beginning of a German nursery rhyme

children in these situations. There were nine of us in the wagon: my grandparents, three aunts, my mother, two of my sisters and myself. My place was usually behind my grandfather who sat together with my grandmother on the coach box. To spare the horses, my mother often walked along the wagon. It was impossible for all of us to sleep in the wagon. My mother and I would sleep at times under the wagon on hay and blankets. I have to mention here that we did not speak High German; we only spoke our dialect.

When we were lying under the wagon one night, I heard my mother whisper:

Child, are you sick?

No, mother. I just cannot sleep. Why do we have to sleep under the wagon?

Child, there is no room in the wagon. Marcella and Helen sleep in the wagon. And it is not that cold either. Are you covered up alright?

I am not cold. It's just that so many things go through my mind. Didn't we want to cross the border to Germany?

Well, the Americans did not let us pass. And the Russians wanted to send us to Siberia, because they thought we were Germans. Because we were able to prove to them that we were born in Romania, they told us we should go there. And now we are on our way back to our Heimat (home, native place).

Mother, what does Heimat really mean?

Child, that is the place where we were born and raised and where we spoke the same language. And where we knew everybody, where we sang the same songs and celebrated the same customs and traditions. Heimat is like a community, a place where you feel safe and taken care of. We lost that when we were resettled, and now we want to get back there. But who knows what awaits us there. We had to leave everything behind when we left.

Mother, I still can't get over it when I think of how grandfather slaughtered the pig. It screamed like crazy because it knew that he wanted to kill it. And how he was running after the pig with a huge knife and had to stab it a few times before it died.

Well, we had to fry everything for the trip. And who knows how long it will last.

Mother, where is dad? We haven't seen him for so long. When he was on furlough last time, he promised to come back soon.

Child, if I only knew where he is. The war is over. Let's hope he wasn't caught by the Russians. We don't know anything about Wendel and Longinus either and haven't heard anything about my brother Georg for a long time. Even if they were alive, how would they know we are on our way back home.

Mother, why do the Czechs hate us so much? We didn't do anything to them.

Child, when we were resettled, we did not know that they would kick out the Czechs and then give us their farms. We wouldn't have liked that either. But despite that they treated us rather well, because they knew that we were not responsible for their eviction. Your grandfather was even imprisoned because he did not want to accept the farm – he saw how they expelled the Czech owners. At the end he said 'yes' nevertheless, but ever since he is mad at the Germans who did this. They (the Czechs) haven't done anything to us, but when we passed through X, I saw how they threw German soldiers out of the hospital window onto the street. Hitler created a tremendous disaster, and a lot of innocent people have to suffer for that now. We won't have it easy as Germans until we get back to our village.

Mother, why do we speak such a strange German language. I was in school only for a short time, but the other children laughed at me when I spoke.

Our language is a mixture. Our ancestors came from different regions in Germany. The Millers came from Swabia, the Ternes clan is supposed to have come from Alsace, and where my mother came from, I don't know, especially when she says 'die Gatz is in de Geller gefall' (the cat fell into the cellar). In our language we also have French words, such as 'plafond' and 'selles'. And when our people left Germany, first to Poland and then to Bessarabia, they also picked up some Slavic words. And then in Romania, they added Turkish and Romanian words. We don't even know where some of the words come from. Your Müller grandfather often used 'heidi' and 'greitebaddel', words that are definitely not German. And tomatoes we called 'Baddeltschance'. We simply accepted a lot of words into our language and babbled in our own way. I think some of our words do not exist anywhere else, as for example 'Dudderwenche' (motorcycle), 'Kradde' (crotch), and 'Hingelsknechtje' (chicken

bone). When you hear these words, you feel as if you were home. For that reason, I think that our language is also our Heimat.

And all of a sudden they were there. Even though we had heard a few days before that we would soon meet the Russians, we were not really prepared and were terribly afraid of what we were going to encounter. The women besmeared their faces with dirt and pulled their head scarves lower.

Suddenly a troop of drunken Russian soldiers approached us, fired a few shot into the air and screamed a word that sounded like “tschess” and pointed to their wrists. Fortunately, my grandfather wore an old wristwatch which they tore off his hand by force. That seemed to satisfy them for they moved on to the next wagon where the passengers were not so lucky; we heard hysterical cries from women.

Thus the homeless and displaced continue to move on over back roads and through woods. The fear of the Russians is especially visible in the faces of the women. Towards evening we found a hidden clearing in the woods and decided to stop. It was time to snack on meats that had been preserved in lard and open bottles of plum brandy, called ‘țuika’ in our dialect. And what surprised me was the change in the mood. The hope of the return to the homeland seemed to have been rekindled and raised everyone’s spirit so that some even struck up our Dobrogea song, somewhat subdued of course.

You merry people from the Dobrogea are you all together?

Well then, let us drive on horse and wagon outside the city where the enemy is camping out.

What kind of people are we and what kind of people are you?

We are merry people from the Dobrogea, we are jolly fellas.

What kind of people are we and what kind of people are you?

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(free translation)

And all of a sudden, one of my aunts, her hair loose and disheveled and widely gesticulating, ran through the clearing singing a song full-throatedly:

To the Black Sea strand
 Where our cradle stood
 That is where we want to go
 That is where we prospered
 That is where we want to go
 Despite all the dangers. *

(free translation)

Thus we chugged and trotted along. It was especially unpleasant when it rained. I usually sat behind my grandfather who hardly ever said a word. He was a quiet and very strict person; towards me on the other hand he was always friendly and affectionate. When I was three years old, I sat on the threshing machine and had fun tossing all the tools around me; my grandfather merely laughed. He would not have been so lenient with his

own children. He smoked continuously, and I can clearly remember how he held the cigarette between his thumb and his index finger, both of which had turned yellow and brown. He was rather stubborn and absolutely convinced of his opinions which at times did not square with reality. This proved to be true in one particular case. When we left our farm in Czechoslovakia, my grandfather took along a cow so that we would have milk during the trip. Unfortunately, the cow took ill and quickly lost weight. So my grandfather thought he would exchange the cow for a horse. Our two horses pulling the wagon didn't look so good anymore; the heavy weight of the wagon and its passengers seemed to be a bit too much for them. Thus my grandfather left for a village with the cow and came back with a splendid black stallion. He was really excited about the trade. No one wanted to believe that he had swapped an emaciated cow for such a beautiful horse.

The enormous shock came two days later. The black stallion lay spread-eagled and rolled around on the ground; white foam dripped from its nostrils and mouth. We stood around the horse agape and terrified; no one seemed to know what to do to help the horse. An uncle of mine approached my grandfather and said: "You traded a cow for a horse that has epilepsy! That was not a good trade!" This reproach my grandfather just had to swallow. But I felt drawn to the horse. I really suffered when it had one of its seizures. My mother once said that horses also have a soul. And when I looked into the horse's eyes, I knew she was right. Because it fell over every once in a while, I named it Fallum (fall over). I took good care of it every day, curried and groomed it and gave it the best hay I could find. Fallum let me ride and sit under it. The horse just put up with me in every way. So Fallum and I became friends, comrades. Yet despite the affection and attachment something unforeseen happened. While I was riding proudly on Fallum in a clearing, two older boys who seemed to be jealous suddenly started hitting the backside of Fallum with switches. Fallum reared up and violently struck out its hind legs. I fell from the horse, got up again and ran after it. Unwary I grabbed the horse's tail and wanted to stop it. Fallum, of course, had no idea that it was I who held on to its tail, lashed out and hit me right on the mouth. My upper lip was split and my front teeth were bleeding. Sure it hurt, but I did not cry because I knew it was my fault. One of my aunts who had seen the entire event wiped away the blood and put a band-aid on my lip, and that was it.

We slowly but surely were running out of food. Only some lard is left over from the meat that had been preserved in it. I didn't know hunger until then; it is something gruesome that gnaws in your entrails and doesn't let you think of anything else. My mother who gives us whatever she can find doesn't know what to do anymore. She has always been there for us, and her love and care gives me a feeling of warmth and security. I can notice how she suffers. And then she decides to swallow her pride. "Come along, Hans," she says, "we are going to get something to eat." By that she means, of course, that we are going to go begging. To be forced to go begging is not a simple matter for somebody like my mother who has worked all her life and managed a farm. "Child," she says, "don't be ashamed, we have to survive, and God is not going to leave us in the lurch."

And so we walk to an Hungarian village and knock somewhat ashamedly at a door. An elderly lady opens the door and looks at us with big compassionate eyes. We don't even have to say anything: she goes back into the house and returns with a can of milk and a loaf of bread. My mother wants to kiss her hands, but she makes the sign of the cross and says something in Hungarian. On the way back, my mother says: "The Hungarians are good people! They don't have much to eat themselves and yet they help wherever they can."

You can't go begging all the time; you have to learn to cope with hunger in your own way. I escape into my imagination to overcome the pain in my bowels. And then I think of my other grandfather, Mülleropa, the teller of fairy tales. My maternal grandfather's name was Markus; he was a short, somewhat chubby man, friendly and full of zest for life. All grandchildren, and I think we were seven, remember him very fondly. He had a special

talent; he could relate fairy tales with such sincere conviction that the characters came alive. He also had a very cunning trick: he would wink at one of us and then that person would know that he or she would be the hero or heroine of the tale. We gathered at his feet and listened intently. The fairy tale of the glass mountain was my favorite; I could visually imagine how the king's son climbed up and then slid down the glass mountain. I immersed myself into this fairy tale when my stomach growled. After all I had my own horse, Fallum, on whose back I intended to climb the mountain to win the golden apples of the princess. But how was I to succeed without Fallum skidding down the precipice. Then it occurred to me to put blinders over Fallum's eyes, because then he wouldn't know that he is riding on glass. I was almost paralyzed when I looked at the steep, glassy slope. But I took courage and whispered into Fallum's ears: "Giddy up, dear friend; we'll make it!" It wasn't easy. Fallum slipped every once in a while, but he caught himself and climbed his way step by step up the mountain. Then when we saw the castle from where the princess waved to us with the golden apples, there was no stopping him. The gate of the castle opened, the princess appeared, and handed me the three golden apples and said: "I have been waiting for you for a long time. The apples are yours!" Well, then I thought of a different ending. Full of humility I looked into her beautiful face and said: "Dear princess! You possess magic powers, don't you? Couldn't you give me three loaves of bread that will never run out instead of the golden apples? She looked at me compassionately with her blue eyes and smiled. That is how I slightly altered the fairy tale so that it would soothe the pain at least in my imagination.

The wheels are creaking and clattering and put one to sleep. My mother is walking beside the wagon, because there is hardly any room inside and because she pities the horses. Whenever she turns her face towards me, I can see a scar on her forehead, a scar for which I am actually responsible. Because of the uniform rhythm of the wheels I get lost in a drowsy state in which the images of the guilt-ridden fatality rise before me. I can see myself all alone in a huge room in the middle of which stands a giant tiled stove. It was Christmas! And I was all alone waiting for Santa Claus. Unfortunately, he never came alone; he was always accompanied by his servant Beelzebub, a black man with chains around his shoulders. Santa Claus not only came with presents, but also with a list, on which all the sins committed during the year were written down. And since I was, which everyone knew, a little mischievous rogue it was unavoidable that in my childish exuberance I committed quite a few silly pranks and tricks. So I was all alone in this large, cold room and waited for Santa Claus and Beelzebub. And I knew what was going to happen to me because I had done a few improper things; I had knocked in a few windows, smashed a lot of cups on telephone masts, put little frogs down girls' necks, stole apples and pears from the neighbor's garden, and who knows what else.

There I stood trembling and terribly afraid. There is a knock at the door, and I expect that the nasty servant would be the first one to enter. In my desperation I grab a piece of kindling wood from a bucket behind the tile stove and throw it with all the might of a five-year old in the direction of the door. But it is not Beelzebub who comes in first but Santa Claus. And to make matters worse, the piece of kindling hits him right in the middle of the forehead. Well, in my mind it was self-defense. Santa Claus is bleeding, Beelzebub approaches, puts me over his knees and gives me a thorough spanking. There is no longer any need to read the list of my misdemeanors. The big surprise comes the next morning. My mother appears with a rather deep wound on her forehead, and I understand all of a sudden who Santa Claus was and that there probably is no real Santa Claus. In hindsight, however, I am rather disappointed with this insight.

The wheels are rattling and rumbling along. All of us are gripped by a certain restlessness, excitement, and expectation of what is awaiting us. I live in my fairy tales and in my imagination, but my countrymen are all adults. How can they just drive into the unknown, into uncertainty like that? I don't quite get it and therefore ask my grandfather about it: "Why are you all so attached to this village Caramurat?" My grandfather turns around and responds seriously and thoughtfully: "Because we built everything with our hands there. We stomped the clay bricks with our feet and dried them in the sun. And then we all put together and had a beautiful church built. Our village was the most beautiful one in all of Dobrogea. But to be honest, I have to add that there was something else. The evenings in the summer were so lukewarm: we would be sitting on benches in front of the house cracking sunflower seeds and telling stories. We didn't need a radio. And then the aroma of the quince apples in late summer – you just cannot imagine what they smelled like. And at night it got so dark, you couldn't see your hands in front of your face. It is really impossible to explain why we're so attached to the homeland." And my aunt, who had placed a band-aid on my lip, adds: "We had such a beautiful mulberry tree in the back yard; when I think of how sweet the berries tasted!" My grandfather laughs and says somewhat ironically: "And on the church wall little manikins would dance at night and if you laughed at them, they would jump down and beat you up." My grandmother raises her voice in the background: "Josep, don't scare the kids; these are mere fairy tales!"

My grandfather who had attended a meeting discussing the route ahead, tells us that we have to drive through Budapest in order to cross the Danube. As we enter the city, we see nothing but rubble, debris, and ashes. Three bridges across the Danube have been bombarded, only one is provisionally traversable. The horses are dragging themselves over a demolished street full of potholes as if they were afraid of something. My mother is warning me: "Hans, don't look down! Just look straight ahead." Of course, I cannot resist and look down. Lifeless bodies are floating down the Danube.

For days our wagons are rolling along the Danube in the direction of Romania. When we finally reach Arad, everyone is heaving a sigh of relief, because now our people can communicate with the population in Romanian. We stay approximately two weeks. The adults take on temporary jobs on farms in order to feed their families; they help weeding in the cornfields and vineyards.

I don't know whether it was the tension within the wagon, the cramped and crowded living conditions, or simply the impatience of my mother.

She decided to leave the trek and continue on her own. She even succeeded in locating a train to Constanța. But since she could not pay for tickets in a compartment, we ended up in an open cattle wagon without a roof. It would have been bearable if it hadn't rained. But when it started to pour and all of us got soaking wet and our cardboard suitcases softened, my mother was close to despair. She bent over us to protect us from the rain. We were a sorry picture of misery. But there was no end to the misery. When we finally arrived in the Black Sea station, we stood there totally lost: My mother with my younger sister in one arm, in the other a tattered suitcase; I'm dragging the other worn out suitcase along the ground, and my older sister is struggling with a big bag.

My mother is fortunate enough to find a Romanian who works on a collective farm near our village; she convinces him to take us along on his tractor. She is really excited; she knows the road from Constanța to our village like the back of her hand. She tells me that my dad, after having sold the harvest crop in Constanța,

would have a few drinks and arrive home asleep on the wagon; the horses knew their way home without the coachman.

The driver lets us off. Before we get to our village, we have to cross a Romanian village. The expectation is clearly visible in the eyes of my mother. Her excitement infects me as well. After all, I was born here; however, I remember only vaguely a few details.

What my mother had told me comes back; images of a farm yard full of chickens and geese, of a cow and two horses in a stable, and of a hysterically barking little dog.

We trudge along until we reach our church. My mother has tears in her eyes; she falls to her knees and makes the sign of the cross. "Children, just look how beautiful our church is. I used to sing in the choir here on Sundays!"

But where to now? Nothing belongs to us here any longer; all of the houses are inhabited by Romanians.

"Children, wait here a while! I will look out for accommodations. Hans, take care of your sisters until I return."

It doesn't take long; she is back in half an hour and seems even glad. As she tells us later, not all countrymen had left the village.

A distant relative lives in the rectory and is going to help us. We are offered shelter in a small room in the rectory next to the church. We don't have any beds, but it is possible to sleep on chests all the same.

After some time – I don't know how long it took – the caravan of our people finally arrives in our village. And what surprises all of us, the Romanian owners of our houses offer everyone a place to stay. My maternal and paternal grandparents even find shelter in their former houses. It looks as if our people have taken possession of the village again. But now they are the servants and not the masters. The initial euphoria over having arrived in our native village soon subsides, especially when the women are forced by the mayor to wash uniforms for the Russian army. My mother included. While they are doing their work, they are molested by drunken soldiers. My sisters and I are fortunate; one of our aunts who had arrived with the caravan takes care of us; otherwise we would be totally on our own. The aunt who has taken the place of our mother simply refused to obey the mayor. He beat her mercilessly, but she repeated: "You can beat me to death, but I will stay with the children." Together with her own two children there are five of us now. Who knows what would have happened without her; she was strict but fair.

It seemed that tempers had calmed down and a kind of peaceful normalcy had taken root. But that was pure illusion. Misery returned rather violently. In the evenings armed and drunken Russian soldiers would come into the village and try to pull the women out of the houses. When they came, we children would stand in front outside and scream as loud as possible to protect our mother; sometimes that would melt their hearts, but not always. The fear for my mother weighed me down so much that I would often pray to the mother of God in our church. Then one night it seemed as if I had awakened and was suddenly blinded by a circular bright light. I lay there frozen stiff and could not move. The light slowly dissolved into a smiling face. I somehow recognize the mother of God and believe she wants to console me. I never told anyone about this. It was my secret.

While my sisters were under the care of my aunt, I was free to roam about, which wasn't exactly safe on the streets. The young Macedonian boys of our village didn't take to us kindly. If they caught one of us by alone, there would be a brawl. Thus when we ventured out onto the street, it was with a stick and preferably with

somebody else. I was fortunate to have a friend with whom I got along very well. Together we felt more secure and courageous. After a few successful frays, the Macedonian kids left us alone. Since there was no supervision by parents, we went on forays into the surroundings, discovered vineyards and water melon fields, and, of course, took a few things with us. You can't quite call it stealing since we did it because we had nothing to eat.

I remember quite well how my friend and I worked together when a wagon loaded with water melons came into the village. The vendor used to shout: "Hi la pepene!" [water melons for sale] Then one of us would go to the front to talk to the vendor while the other one would stealthily grab a water melon, turn around and walk away. We then ate the entire water melon in our hideout in a haystack. At such moments we felt really great, especially if you keep in mind under what constant stress and fear we lived.

Yesterday, I think it was a Sunday, my mother took me by the hand and said: "Come on 'Junge' [lad, boy] – she often called me 'Junge' – Let's look at our former house." She had avoided this subject, I suppose because that topic hurt. Our house is located in the last row. The people who live in the house were at first wondering why we were examining the house so intently. When my mother explained that the house used to belong to us, they were initially cautious. However, after my mother convinced them that she merely wanted to show me where I was born and where my mother had worked as a farmer's wife, the face of the lady of the house relaxed. She allowed us to look into all rooms, even into the stable. Even though nothing belonged to my mother any more, she was nevertheless happy that everything was kept clean and orderly. We said goodbye to the lady and left our former house which my parents had built with their own hands. My mother turned around once more and said: "Well, that's it!" And I knew what she meant.

When we went to the cemetery - that lay a bit outside the village and was rank with weeds - a few days later, it seemed to me that she had something drastic on her mind. She wanted to take leave of everyone, also of those who were buried in the cemetery. She talked to the dead, which seemed somewhat strange to me, and asked me to pray for all of them. Inadvertently, I felt as if pulled to the grave of my great grandfather who was one of the founders of our village. I was wondering what he looked like. Buried in thoughts we returned to the village.

It soon became clear what she had in mind. She could no longer put up with the brutality of the Russian occupation troops. In addition, she had realized that we were foreigners in our own homeland to whom nothing belonged anymore. "Child", she sighed, "we only possess the word for 'Heimat' [homeland], but what the word stands for we lost." My aunts and my grandparents were speechless: "What, you want to leave alone with three kids and no money!" But my mother insisted. What she set her mind on, she stuck to. "We will look for a new 'Heimat' [homeland]", she said optimistically.

And there we stood again, a picture of misery, my mother with my younger sister in one arm, in the other a tattered suitcase, I myself with the other worn out suitcase, and my older sister with a big bag - looking for a new 'Heimat' [homeland].

Towards the end I went once more into our church. On the side altar on the right there stands a statue of the mother of God with the Jesus child in her arms. She wears a blue cloak and beams with beatific love. I kneel down and whisper in a low voice: "Dear mother of God, you smiled at me! Protect us on our search for a new 'Heimat' [homeland]!"