

## **Goodbye Forever to Kleinliebental near Odessa**

Abschied fuer immer aus Kleinliebental bei Odessa

By Unknown Authors

Heimatbuch 2001/2002, Landsmannschaft der Deutschen aus Russland, Stuttgart, Germany, Pages 227 – 230

Translation from German to English by Alex Herzog, Boulder, Colorado

Equally shaken and surprised on the morning of June 22, 1941, our colony woke to the news of the onset of war. Those who still had bad memories of the First World War were in deep shock. All dreaded only the worst.

Beginning with the first day of war we noticed a peculiar relationship toward us taking hold in Soviet authorities. Also, we could not help noticing that in contrast to young men of other nationalities, not a single German was being called to the reserves. And it didn't take long until our Russian and Ukrainian neighbors would give us a taste of their hostility against everyone and everything German.

By September of 1941 it was not unusual for parents whose student had skipped school to receive a letter that read, "It has come to our attention that you are awaiting with treasonous intent the arrival of the German troops..."

During the course of two operations in August and September all men of our colony between the ages of 14 and 60 were dragged off to dig trenches. The front had already reached the Dnieper River just north of us, and the sounds of war had been clearly audible for some time.

We were waiting for even worse things to come and at the same time needed to prepare for the upcoming winter. The children, women, and older folks who had stayed behind, completed the work of the harvest and stored up fodder for the animals. Under the direction of our grandfathers we younger ones were putting down winter seed. We worked very diligently, but the feeling of dread and fear never left us for a moment.

And then came the 2nd of October 1941. We were about to ride to the fields for our usual seed work when our village was suddenly encircled by black-uniformed units. We were forced to turn back. Soon thereafter groups of agitators appeared on our village street. These were made up of teachers and members of the Comsomol from neighboring Russian villages, led by the secondhand dealer M.P. We all knew him well, because we were among his customers. But now he was clad in the jacket of a Communist Party Commissioner, and he looked too much like Stalin himself.

My father had no reservations about meeting M.P. since he had been helpful to the P. family in "the good old times." "What are you planning to do with us?" he asked innocently, but M.P. turned to him and rebukingly said that he was not allowed to converse with us. The black-uniformed men, however, were going from house-to-house informing all Germans that they were to be ready to travel within 12 hours. They would be evacuated.

Some did not need that much time, so that by early afternoon horse-drawn wagons began to appear on the street. M.P. ordered them to unload. Every wagon was subsequently paired with two uniformed men who grabbed the children, some bedding and a few pieces of clothing and put everything onto the wagons. As soon as a wagon was thus loaded, it was directed to move off toward the railroad station of Haitchur, about 70

kilometers away. The insufficient availability of wagons caused the whole procedure to last, not 12 hours, but two whole days. Families whose turn came toward the end had been able to prepare much better than those at the beginning.

Many residents were convinced that we would all be murdered since rumors were flying about that 700 German-Russians ahead of us in the "Shirokaya balka" near Tchapliana were shot and killed, and 200 others were burned alive in a barn at Kilmannstal.

On the way toward Haitchur we rode through the German colonies of Kankrin #6, Friedenfeld, Grossliebental and Viktorfeld, which had all been evacuated ahead of us. Everywhere we saw abandoned pets, dogs, all howling in a heartrending manner, and cows and pigs walking around in vegetable gardens. We could see people with hand-drawn carts dragging away stolen goods without being punished. For all of us these were depressing sights that indicated to us very clearly what might be going on in Kleinliebental.

Arriving at Haitchur we came onto a scene that I might liken to the Day of Last Judgment. The entire rail station sector of town, including many side streets, was overcrowded with families sitting on the ground. They had been brought there to be transported who knows where, but they were unable to continue due to the lack of trains. There were families from the Kankrin Colonies numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, as well as Friedenfeld and Prasler. Soldiers were guarding this immense area.

When we were let off on the other side of the depot close to the rail line, we met many people from our village. There were no sanitary facilities, there was no water, and for food we had only that which we had brought along. Later on we were allowed to get a bucket of water from a remote community well.

We waited two days for a train. Not far from us there were cannons. The artillerymen were wearing clumps of grass on their helmets. Rooftops were crawling with soldiers peering through binoculars. It looked as though the front was approaching.

In the late afternoon of October 5, a freight train with all sorts and types of cars pulled up. It ranged from flat platform cars to tilting coal cars. There was even a green passenger car that was occupied by the crew. Our family was loaded onto a freight car that had previously been used to transport horses, which had left behind plenty of manure. The accompanying soldiers felt sorry for us and allowed us to clean the railcar of manure. They also helped us to "acquire" some boards for putting together a scaffolding framework inside the car. In that way we were able to arrange for 29 sleeping "berths" that had to suffice for nine families.

Even after we had been on our way for a few days, some still clung to the hope that we would soon be taken back to our homes. The women put up a crucifix in the freight car and pleaded with our Lord on the cross to protect us and lead us back home.

We continued eastward, yet after four weeks we still had not even reached the Volga River. The train was held on sidetracks much longer than it was actually underway. We received no food provisions so we were left to scrounging for whatever we could obtain during our stops. That usually consisted of wheat, potatoes, or beets, which we ate raw since there was no way for us to cook or to bake. With time we fabricated a cooking stove out of a bucket, and during the stops we were able to get out of the freight car and do some cooking without stepping into excrement.

We crossed the Volga near Kubyshev, the former (and today's) Samarov. From there on the train began to move faster, so no longer were there any days of stopping on sidetracks. In Ksyl-Orda in the region of Tchili eight freight cars were left behind. We continued along the Turksib, past Chimkent, Chambul and Alma-Ata, in the general direction of Siberia. In these freight cars that were not fit for winter weather it became progressively colder so that eventually we were able to stand it only under down covers.

On November 14 the train stopped inside a mountain gorge. We were told to "get out of the train cars!" We had reached Yangis-Tobe in the Semipalatinsk region. At the time Yangis-Tobe had only a single rail station building with a flat roof, so we had no choice but to camp outdoors under the autumn skies. We had hardly anyone left who was an infant or had become very ill, because most of them had died on the way. At larger depots the authorities had opened the railcar doors, asked about anyone who had died, and the bodies had simply been removed...

Contrary to orders by the rail depot officials, we used railroad ties for a campfire and spent the night close to it, under some sort of cover if possible. It was not until the next evening when oxen-drawn sleds arrived for our transport to Kopektyal, which was 136 kilometers from the rail station. It took two days until we arrived at our destination of Kopekty, where we spent the night in stables. We had been supplied with plenty of straw.

Kopekty, just like many other places in the region, was overcrowded with a great variety of people who had been banished, evacuated, or deported. It was the end of November, and a meter of snow was already covering the ground. At this time of year the landscape was of no other color than white. The entire valley looked like a gigantic carpet into which the small city of Kopekty with its flat rooftops had been embroidered.

In addition to native Kazachs and Tatars, residents of Kopekty at that time also included Poles who had been deported to the Asiatic Soviet Union in 1939 following the occupation of Eastern Poland by the Red Army. Added to them were Volga-Germans from Balzer, who had been transported there three months before us. Even though not a single place to live was available, the authorities somehow managed to "stuff" us into some quarters. It was a room in which three families with a total of 13 people were housed. The room did not even have a stove.

At first our most severe problems had to do with a lack of heating materials. Everywhere in our new home area heating was done by the use of cow chips. Since we had none, there was nothing left for us but to trade our best things for them. But what did we really possess? Well, we simply needed to be very economical in the use of heating material. Since we also did not have any foodstuffs, we made do by sharing and making soups from the flour we had brought with us.

We were even hungrier than during the train trip from Kleinliebental to Kopekty. Thus, the most reliable helpers the Bolsheviks had, namely cold and hunger, hit us with full force even by December of 1941. The weaker ones, especially children and the elderly, died very soon. Every day became a burial day, and the funeral treks seemed to have no end. A son and a daughter of my sister died of scarlet fever. No medical assistance was available.

In February of 1942 the Volga-German men were wrested from their families and transported to work camps in Borovsk near Solimansk. It was through these men that families in Ukraine were finally able to receive information on the addresses of their men who had been dragged off before the general deportations. They also learned that half of the men who had been arrested in September of 1941 had succumbed to famine, which was a fate threatening the rest of us as well.

In October of 1942 deported German-Russian women ages 15 to 55 were also mobilized into the working army. Only mothers with children under eight years of age were allowed to remain behind. (Editor's Note: In innumerable other reports it is said that only those women whose children were under three years of age were left alone. Throughout those reports age limits between 16 and 45 are mentioned, which corresponds to a memorandum, dated October 13, 1942, that was circulated by the leading party and state organs of the Altai region.)

And so it continued through the remaining war years. The final mobilization of women for the Trud Army took place in February of 1945.

In most camps of the Trud Army, which were subordinate to the Gulag system, chances for survival for German women and men were considerably below that of camps that have been written about by Solzhenitzin. Thus, a total number equivalent to double the normal capacity of the three large camps of Borovsk died between November 1941 and January 1945. These three camps held over 30,000 German-Russian men who were slaving away in a factory producing gunpowder. By January of 1943 the entire capacity of the camp was rotated through at least twice, meaning that at least 60,000 of our fathers and brothers lie dead in the swamps of Borovsk. Even today these same swamps still disgorge human bones and smashed skulls (according to Gulag camp rules, the skull of each person who died in the camp was to be smashed with a pointy hammer).

By January of 1943 the factory was finished and was to be activated for normal operation. Moscow was awaiting production for the war, yet reports from Borovsk stated that the number of workers was entirely insufficient. Of the 65,000 to 68,000 or so men who had been dragged to the camps in Borovsk, only about 5,000 remained by the beginning of 1943, and these men were completely rundown. Moscow reacted with an immediate investigation, which produced the information that funds slated for the upkeep of the prisoners had in large part been embezzled. Consequently, three natchalniks were condemned to death for it. Of course, the camps in Borovsk were no exception. There were very similar camps in Kimpersei near Aktyubinsk, where nickel ore was being mined; in Lovaya Lyalya in the Sverdlovsk region (asbestos); in Nishniy Tagi, Chusovaya, Beresniki; in the forests north of Solikamsk; in Nyrob and Krasznovishevsk; in Siberian Tatarsk; in Kraznoshchekovo near Novosibirsk; in Kemerovo; in Karaganda and the surrounding area; and in many other places.

The Soviet authorities, of course, had their reasons for refusing to issue death certificates to the survivors of those who had died in the camps. Many residents of the former Soviet Union, perhaps most of them, still do not have the slightest idea about what had been done to their fellow citizens.

In May of 1945 we heard the longed-for news that the war was over, yet for us German-Russians the war was far from being over. There was no end to our having to perform forced labor or our suffering from hunger. With only 12 hours warning, we were simply moved on to another place, always to one where there was a lot to be done and nothing to be had. Even by 1946 most men remained separated from their families, many had to wait even decades to be reunited with their families, and few ever lived to experience it.

In the fall of 1946, 2,000 German-Russian men were forcefully moved from the camps in Berezniki into the Caucasus, where on Ritza Lake in Georgia they were to erect a convalescent home for the benefit of the Kremlin folks. Following the completion of the dacha they were transported into the Tshelyabisnk region, where they were to build an atomic reactor. Today not a single trace remains of these 2,000 men. (Should any of them still be alive today, the editors request that you please inform the Landsmannschaft der Deutschen aus Russland, Raitelsbergerstr. 49, 70188 Stuttgart.)

They did not survive Project "Tshelyabinsk." Others were forced to work in the uranium enrichment facilities near Leninabad in Uzbekistan. They worked mostly without protection against radiation, did not last very long and died mainly of cancer of the blood. Other camps contained the men who were suffering from having worked in the enrichment facilities. Despite the war's end, death reaped a bountiful harvest as well in Glasov of the Urdmurtic SSR in the northwest Ural region.

Even as of 1952, highly qualified German specialists were moved from their factory jobs and forced to work as simple helpers. At the same time, all German-Russian families who had found residence in cities were simply moved to live in barracks settlements outside of the cities. Only the death of Stalin on March 5, 1953, marked the beginning of any kind of relief at all. For example, we were now allowed to obtain things in a place eight kilometers away without having to ask for permission from the local army command, and our excursions were no longer accompanied by mounted soldiers.

News of the edict by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR of December 13, 1955, which finally lifted the army command's authority over us, did not reach us until March of 1956. The local command ordered us to appear individually, and we were shown a green and a blue printed document for our signature. The green document forced us to promise not to stay in our former home locales any longer than 24 hours, and the blue one forced us to certify that we would not demand compensation from the Soviet State for any and all things confiscated from us in 1941. That's about the way things remain today...

***Our appreciation is extended to Alex Herzog for the translation of this article and the Landsmannschaft der Deutschen aus Russland, Stuttgart, Germany, for permission to post.***