

**Imagining the Unthinkable:
The Forced Removal of Ethnic Germans
at the End of World War II
through the Stories of One Family
by Herta Pitman**



Henry and Elisabeth (Blum) Wolf 2009

World War II ended in 1945. For some of those who survived World War II, the worst period of their lives was just beginning. In the aftermath of the war, millions of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe were expelled from their homelands. Many of these war survivors suffered injuries that for most of us would be unimaginable. Reliable sources in English that explore this topic are rare, though in recent years more works are including this episode, usually in an examination of large-scale forced removal, or genocide. The stories of forced removal of ethnic Germans have often been omitted from discussion due to a rationalization that the harms that befell ethnic Germans were rightfully deserved because of the atrocities committed by Germans during the war. Historical comparisons and enumerations of the massive human toll present an overwhelming sense of atrocity. However it is difficult to imagine how these acts played out for individuals. It is in stories of survivors, some from members of my own family, that provide a human face and a way to seeing the lasting consequences of forced removal violence. This paper is an attempt to understand my background. Very few of those who survived World War II are still alive, and every day their numbers are diminishing. Two of the survivors are my parents.

When I was a young teen my mother would tell me stories of what happened to her when she was in her teens and an ethnic German, specifically a Danube Swabian, in Yugoslavia at the end of the war. Both of my parents are Danube Swabian survivors of forced removal from a small village in Yugoslavia. Perceiving the larger picture makes it possible to place the stories of my parents' lives within the history of that time, and to form an understanding of those stories in the context of the policies that shaped their experiences.

Survivor story

Elisabeth (Blum) Wolf turned fifteen on Sept 5, 1944. On October 17th, Russian troops reached her town of Feketic, Yugoslavia. For an idea of what those days might have been like, I turn to this testimony of Justina Hoffman, another survivor of forced removal from the same small town. Her story is captured in *A Terrible Revenge* (de Zayas 100).

On October 17, 1944, Russian troops marched into our town, followed a few days later by local partisans who took control. Our business was totally looted by the partisans in the first few days; everything had been hauled off. Women and girls had to hide themselves away every night in order to avoid being raped by Russian soldiers.... All Germans were obliged to work in the fields. On the night of November 17, 1944 most German men without regard to age were hauled out of their homes and severely maltreated. They were so badly beaten that blood flowed from numerous wounds, the mouth and nose...

Justina Hoffman goes on to detail rapes of women and girls who were her neighbors (de Zayas 101). Elisabeth was taken prisoner, along with her mother Katherine, her 20 year-old sister Katarina, and her 8 year-old brother Nick.

Further testimony from Justina Hoffman describes her removal to and conditions in the camp at Sekic, where Elisabeth and her family were also held (de Zayas 101).

On January 16, 1945 we were thrown out of our homes once and for all and brought to the camp at Sekic. There were about 6,000 Germans from northern Batchka interned here... Each day we had to assemble at 4:30 A.M., double rows standing for hours in the cold on the assembly ground. Partisans took us to our workplaces and brought us back at night. Each night we were counted off rank and file. When the numbers did not tally, which happened just about every other day, we had to remain standing in the cold, often until midnight... When the mothers were off working, the children were housed separately. The kids were beaten whenever they tried to get to their mothers.

Elisabeth and Katarina were separated from their mother and brother. Again, Justina Hoffman's description provides detail of how this separation may have occurred (de Zayas 101-102).

On October 1, 1945, the whole camp had to assemble, more than 8,000 people. Mothers with small children, the sick and invalid, old people and cripples, all of us were shipped off to extermination camps at Gakovo, Krushevlje, and Ridjica, where several thousands starved to death. Since I was among the able-bodied, they kept me back at Sekic.

Elisabeth and Katarina, being able-bodied young women remained at the forced labor camp in Sekic. The sisters themselves have told some stories of their time in the camp at Sekic. Elisabeth tells that when she and Katarina arrived in the camp at Sekic they each had one coat. Where they slept there was no bed and no bedding, just the hard floor. The two sisters would lie down on one coat and share the other as their blanket. Through the cold winters there was no heat but that which came from their own bodies. They were unbearably cold and Elisabeth believes that were it not for the shared coats and body heat, they both would have frozen to death. Many people did die in the camp. Elisabeth tells of a woman who died of severe burns she received while making soup. For that woman, there was no medical help, nothing to ease her pain. She screamed until she succumbed to her burns. Elisabeth lived daily near starvation, she became so thin she stopped having periods, her body so ravaged that she lost many of her teeth. She says there are stories of that time she will never tell. They are too horrible to relive, too horrible to burden her daughter with.

Numerous first-person survivor accounts tell of near-starvation, beatings, rapes, bitter cold, back-breaking work, torture, disease, the witnessing of murder, sleep deprivation, constant terror and loss (deZayas 99, 103, 105 Walter 62,73, 105, 108 Andor 15, 28, 31, 56 Herscha 30, 34,35, 57).

Elisabeth's sister Katarina told this story about a particularly horrible moment while they were in the camp, "One day when we weren't there very long Lissya (her nickname for Elisabeth) wanted to give up. She ran towards the fence where there were guards with guns. She wanted them to shoot her. I ran after her screaming and crying, afraid that they'd shoot me too. I grabbed her and stopped her. We were both crying. I told her she couldn't go, because I couldn't live without her. After that she stayed for me." In the camp Katarina struggled with whether she should have let Elisabeth go, so she wouldn't have suffered all she later suffered. Katarina knows now she did the right thing, because they did survive.

Elisabeth and Katarina's mother Katherine and brother Nick were taken to a camp called Gakowa. Survivors described the camp at Gakowa and others like it as "starvation," "liquidation" or "death" camps. And in fact Katherine Blum died in Gakowa, most likely of starvation. 5,827 died at Gakowa (Leicht 72). Where Katherine is buried is unknown. Eight year-old Nick was then put into an orphanage. "Orphans' were to be taken to state-run children's camps and orphanages, where they were to be raised as Serbian communists" (Andor 91). Elisabeth's father, also named Nick, at the age of 45 had been drafted into the German army shortly before the Russians reached Feketic. The elder Nick was captured and sent to work in a POW camp in Russia. Nick Blum did not survive. Where he is buried is unknown.

Through word-of-mouth the sisters learned where their brother Nick was, and were able to have him brought to the camp in Sekic. By now he was ten or eleven. Though conditions in the orphanage were hard, it was much worse in Sekic. Katarina was again torn about whether she had done the right thing. By bringing what remained of her family together, perhaps Nick would also die. He asked his sisters, "Why didn't you leave me there? At least there we had some food." About a year later all three joined a group that made a successful escape. The three siblings crossed into safety in Austria, eventually emigrated to Cleveland, married, raised families and are still living today.

The disposal of millions

Forced migration following wars was common in all of Europe, continuing into the 20th century in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The Treaty of Lausanne set a precedent for legitimizing forced removals. In 1939, the Soviet Union and Germany secretly agreed to divide Poland, displacing as many as 1.5 million, and over 100,000 of these died. The Germans displaced millions of Slavic people, enslaved millions from Poland and annihilated 6 million Jews. 40 million in Europe died during WWII and many times that number were left homeless. Soviet troops along with local army units forced millions (mostly ethnic Germans) to leave their homes. At the end of the war, Soviet troops arrested several hundred thousand German civilians in Eastern European countries, and transferred them to internment camps. Many of these imprisoned died, the survivors existed under unimaginable misery (Ther 2-4). Behind the act of forced removal lay the perpetrators' assurance that the victims did not belong (Bessel 10). Winston Churchill told the British House of Commons in 1944 that deportations would provide the most "satisfactory and lasting" solution to ethnic problems. He said, "There will be no mixture of populations to cause endless trouble as in Alsace-Lorraine. A clean sweep will be made" (Mann 353).

Describing the horrific with restraint

It is difficult to determine just what words to use when describing these events. Joanna De Groot, in her chapter in *Removing Peoples* asks whether using neutral and dispassionate terms and rational analysis, suppresses or misrepresents "the elements of suffering, coercion, emotion, violence and trauma which were present ... in episodes of forced removal" (Bessel 436). Yet, accounts that employ emotional language run the risk of exhibiting bias and inviting dismissal. There is a debate about what term(s) to apply to forced removal events. Some of the terms that pepper the sources are: expulsion, deportation, repatriation, resettlement, population transfer, forced removal, ethnic cleansing, murderous cleansing, genocide, politicide, mass murder/massacre and democide. I find many of these terms too benign to truly capture the trauma of these events. Norman M. Naimark, in *Fires of Hatred* defines genocide as the "intentional killing off of part or all of an ethnic, religious, or national group, while ethnic cleansing's goal is to remove people from a territory and to seize control of that territory." He says, "at the extreme ethnic cleansing and genocide are distinguishable only by the ultimate intent." Naimark goes on to say that even when "forced deportation is not genocidal in its intent, it is often genocidal in its effects" (Naimark 3-4). Richard Bessel and Claudia B Haake, in *Removing Peoples* agree that genocide or 'ethnic cleansing' are not the goal of

forced removal, though removals often end in deaths (Bessel 4-5). Though none of the available terms for me completely satisfies the need to be accurate yet unemotional, and noting that none of these terms apply in the case of forced labor, I have determined to use “forced removal” in most instances.

These numbers were people

In the introduction to *Redrawing Nations*, Mark Kramer notes of the post World War II forced removals that vast numbers died, and millions experienced unmitigated hardship and cruelty. Indeed, R J Rummel's *Death by Government* enumerates the megamillions of casualties as a result of murder sanctioned by governments during the 20th century. Of these, nearly 21,000,000 died at the hands of the Nazis. It is a staggering number. At the end of the war 15,000,000 ethnic German civilians were exiled from the places where they lived in eastern Europe (at the time Poland, Czechoslovakia, parts of the Soviet Union, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania) (Fassmann 522) and nearly two million died (Rummel 298), making the number murdered by Marshall Josip Broz Tito's regime pale by comparison. In Yugoslavia, ethnic Germans numbering approximately 55,000 died in forced labor camps or were murdered (Rummel 354). The remainder, some 300,000, fled to Germany and Austria. Alf Ludtke, in *Explaining Forced Migration* speaks of the “monotony and... magic of large and ‘simple’ numbers” (Bessel 25). Yes, the enormous numbers mask individual experience. Of course, the uprooting and destruction of millions is unimaginable. That's why the stories of individuals matter.

What they suffered

Ethnic Germans were displaced and killed, starved, enslaved and orphaned. Forced removals took the form of deportations within or expulsion beyond borders, and genocide (Ther 1). They endured physical suffering, forced travel, incarceration, injury and starvation (Bessel 420). Ethnic Germans were subjected to beatings, mutilation and torture, shortages of food and medicine, and harsh weather in inadequate, unheated shelter. Lack of basic sanitation often led to disease and death. Resisters were forced to comply at gunpoint, or shot (Ther 2). They were subjected to harsh and murderous treatment, and savage, deadly beatings, and looted, raped and expelled in unheated freight or open cars without food or water for days, even weeks (Rummel 299). “Tens of thousands were put into concentration camps where [many] subsequently died” (Rummel 354). Property and valuables appropriated, imprisoned in these

“lethal camps... internees were left to starve slowly to death” (Rummel 300). Oskar Schindler was one of the ethnic Germans swept up in the forced removals (Mann 353).

The agreements and motives of Allies

It is uncomfortable to acknowledge that agreements between allied forces put a bit of shameful responsibility on the shoulders of Great Britain and the United States. What happened during the war and after were often remarkably similar. Except that these conditions were “carried out under the auspices, and with full approbation of the international community” (Ther 4). Stalin wanted to continue to expel Germans, and the US and Britain hoped to reign in the brutal expulsions and revenge attacks, and establish a more peaceful and restrained process (Ther 5). ‘Orderly transfer’ of German populations was explicitly authorized in the Potsdam Agreement, resulting in the forced removal of 12 million ethnic Germans from parts of East-Central Europe. The Yalta agreement permitted ‘reparations-in-kind’ which served as justification for the enslavement of millions of ethnic Germans. Germany’s actions during the war stirred anger and revulsion toward Germany, which overrode any qualms that Western leaders may have had about expelling millions of ethnic Germans (Ther 6). In addition, political considerations (war-weariness, isolationism and a belief that establishing single-ethnicity nations would bring lasting peace) motivated British and US leadership to acquiesce to Stalin’s demands (Ther 6). As Soviet forces in the east had already been brutally expelling Germans, the allies sought through the Potsdam Agreement to make the forced removals more humane (Rummel 299).

Remembering removal in Germany and in the US

For years after Elisabeth Blum Wolf told me stories of what she suffered, I assumed hers was a fairly isolated experience. I wondered how something so shocking could have been a common experience and yet I had never heard of it outside of my home. It’s only recently that I have fully understood that experiences such as hers were a part of widespread events that affected millions of ethnic Germans.

In 2002, German Nobel laureate Günter Grass published *Im Krebsgang*, a novel based on the true story of the sinking of the ship *Wilhelm Gustloff* on January 30, 1945. On that day the passengers were refugees attempting to flee the Red Army. The ship was attacked by a Soviet submarine. Approximately 9,000 passengers did not survive. Grass’ narrator realizes “that it should have been his generation’s obligation to report the story of the

invasion of the Soviet Army into the Reich” and to “describe the misery of the East Prussian refugees: treks westward in winter, death in snowdrifts, death on the side of the road, and in holes in the ice when the frozen Frisches Haff began to break from the falling bombs and under the weight of horses” (Moeller 147-149). Robert G. Moeller goes on in his article, *Sinking Ships*, to explain that in reality, stories of the forced removal experiences of eastern European ethnic Germans appear regularly in Germany; in parliamentary debates, in collected testimonies of the expelled, in movies, in TV mini-series, novels, and first person accounts in paperback. In addition, German school textbooks give “the expulsions of ethnic Germans... a central place” (Prauser 84). Despite Grass’ indication to the contrary, Germans have had access to stories of forced removal.

It’s actually little wonder though that the ethnic cleansing episodes following World War II have been largely forgotten in the US (Ther 1). In American pop culture, the Germany of the mid-20th century is occupied in film, television and writing, with Nazis and the Holocaust. In public K-12 education little enough attention is paid to any history outside of the US, and to be fair there are a lot of painful episodes from all around the world that are left out of the history books of school children. In his article on school history textbooks, Luigi Cajani shares this one of two, in his assessment, wholly unsatisfactory approaches to the topic, from Houghton Mifflin’s *The Earth and its Peoples*:

Many parts of the world were flooded with refugees. Some 90 million Chinese fled the Japanese advance. In Europe millions fled from the Nazis or the Red Army or were herded back and forth, on government orders. Many refugees never returned to their homes, creating new ethnic mixtures more reminiscent of the New World than of the Old.

He finds another one-paragraph description in one other textbook that provides a stronger sense of the desperate state of the situation; dealing with flight from capture and torture, the threat of pillaging and rape by Soviet forces, and the existence of work and death camps. Other texts leave the subject of forced removal after World War II out altogether (Prauser 87-88). There are few places where Americans might have become aware of this history.

‘Just’ retribution and “comparative cruelty”

There are arguments made that what happened to ethnic Germans was ‘just’ retribution for the atrocities that Germans committed during World War II. Nazi executioners denied the humanity of Jews during the Holocaust, and in the aftermath of the war, Soviet troops and partisan forces under the leadership of Joseph Stalin and Marshall Tito, justified the brutal punishment and murder of civilians and the exclusion of ethnic Germans from Soviet-

occupied areas. This forced removal of ethnic Germans is a piece of history that's often left out of the narrative of human cruelty, often because those who are aware of this episode are able to dismiss it as deserved, justifying brutality because of brutality (Bessel 186). Exploiting the victims' ethnic connection to those who committed the crimes does not absolve the victimizers (Bessel 187). It is however, as Joanna De Groot proposes in *Removing Peoples*, valuable to distinguish the difference between the Holocaust and the forced removal of ethnic Germans. While in forced labor and removal, cruelty, coercion and intimidation were utilized to manage captives, and though at times it also resulted in death and even massacres, they are distinguishable from the wholesale genocide of the Holocaust. Christopher Browning, in his debate with Daniel Goldhagen on *Hitler's Willing Executioners* is not "comfortable in engaging in a debate of comparative cruelty" and asks, "What state-sanctioned murder has not unleashed unimaginable cruelties?" There have been cases of mass-murder and cruelty on every continent but Antarctica, even as near as Minnesota's Fort Snelling, where many Dakota died in the winter of 1862-63. Suffering at the hands of men varies only in means, scale and methods. For an individual victim, the motivations and methodology of their oppressors does not matter.

"Collective guilt" and claims for reparations

Other reasons that have been used to silence the stories of forced removal are that Germans have used these stories of suffering to absolve their own collective guilt, or because there is a fear that the motive for telling these stories is to obtain reparations. These motives may have been at play, but the lived experiences of the victims of this second wave of atrocity following the war, were recorded in "documents of the expulsion" that one reviewer described as "documents of horror" (Schissler 93). To ask these victims to first repair the wounds inflicted by perpetrators of other atrocities, before seeking comfort for their own hurts is disingenuous, and focusing on guilt, recompense and retribution prevent us from acknowledging human suffering as a step to healing and prevention (Bessel 10-11).

Survivor story

In the fall of 1944 **Henry Wolf** left the town of Feketic to attend boarding school. His father, Adam, at age 42 had been drafted late into the war and was not home when Henry left for school that fall. His mother Katarina and his brother, also named Adam, remained in Feketic. Though the war had not officially ended, his teacher told Henry in

late April, “Wir haben das Krieg verloren (We have lost the war)” and that he should go home, but there was no longer a home for Henry to go to. He traveled to the border of Yugoslavia but, in retrospect fortunately, was not allowed to pass, or he likely would also have become a prisoner in a forced labor camp. Fourteen and alone, with no one to turn to and no assets, he relied upon help from strangers, scavenged, begged, and bartered work for food and shelter. He first went back to the vicinity of his school, where he was able to work for room and board with a family one of his teachers knew. At one point, Henry contracted a case of typhus that would have killed him, but two women for whom he had been working in exchange for housing and food, took care of him, and they bartered their own work for a doctor to provide medicine for him. Henry survived. In his wanderings, just eight miles from his old school, he passed Mauthausen concentration camp. Even then he did not know what they suffered. From his description, what he saw was more like the photo on the left below, rather than the one on the right.



Women and children survivors of Mauthausen speak to an American liberator through the barbed wire, and starving prisoners at the Ebensee subcamp. Taken in May 1945. property US Holocaust Memorial Museum

Henry’s mother and brother, helped by other family members, fled ahead of the Russian army and managed to escape into Germany, as only a few hundred of Feketic’s German villagers were able to do. Near Berlin, they were able to unite with Adam senior, who was still serving in the Army. The family, along with Adam senior’s unit, managed to reach Lubeck, in the British zone in northern Germany. There Adam was taken prisoner and held for a time in a POW camp. Henry, in June 1946 through correspondence with family in the USA, eventually learned that all of his family had ended up in Lubeck. Henry, now fifteen, struggled to travel there alone. After an arduous journey, Henry made it to Lubeck and reunited with his family. Conditions for refugees arriving in Germany were chaotic too. New arrivals found destroyed cities, food scarcity, famine, shortage of health and medical services for the starving, ill-

clothed, homeless and sick refugees (Rummel 303). In 1952, Henry and his family emigrated to Cleveland. In 1955 he met Elisabeth Blum, who he had known in grade school. They married and had two children, Nick and Herta.

No one person's experience can tell us what happened to everyone else. Elisabeth (Blum) Wolf's and Henry Wolf's stories could be isolated instances. There are however stories from other victims of forced removal that provide evidence that their suffering was not unique (Andor, Walter, Herscha). These are not primarily stories of soldiers and fighters, but of women who had not been in the fight, children, and young teens, and the old.

According to Henry Wolf, at the end of the war there were approximately 6,000 people living in Feketic, the population made up of Hungarians and Germans; roughly one third of them German Danube Swabians whose predecessors had settled in that area about 200 years before. At the end of the forced removals there were no ethnic Germans left in Feketic. Henry Wolf tells that of the German villagers of his home town, 107 men aged 16-50 died as German soldiers, and 355 others died of the consequences of forced removal. One out of four of the Volksdeutsch of his village, were no longer alive. It's remarkable that Elisabeth and Henry survived and found each other.

Conclusion

It's been more than sixty years since these events took place. Henry Wolf doesn't want to talk about his childhood heroes, brave soldiers and daring aviators of the Third Reich. It's likely if the war had ended later, Henry might have even darker, and justifiably guilty memories to withhold from his life story. Elisabeth Blum Wolf has never gotten over the memory of starving. Now a victim of dementia, she is no longer telling the stories of her experiences at the end of the war. But a legacy of those starving days stays in her dwindling memory. At meals now in her nursing home, Elisabeth hoards the packets of sugar, the little containers of jam. One of the things she still knows; you can never be sure there will be enough to eat tomorrow. To hold these then children responsible for the suffering that befell them is a travesty of justice. It may not be clear where to lay the blame, but if it is necessary to do so it should not be at the feet of these victims. The role of survivor stories like theirs can be to help us to stop distinguishing between 'us and them,' and to help create a dialog of inclusion.

Elisabeth Wolf says, "War hurts people, mostly little children and old people, who never got to say anything about it." At the conclusion of *Im Krebsgang*, Gunter Grass' character Paul Prokriefke states, "This will never end, it will never end" (Moeller 181). To silence Elisabeth and Henry Wolf because others withstood even greater injuries,

or because they should share 'collective guilt' because they had an ethnic connection to those who perpetrated those injuries only adds another small link to the chain justifying retribution against innocents. If we do not acknowledge the futility of vengeance when it only reaches the defenseless, this will never end, it will never end.

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