



1

The Ripple Effect

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Stories of human cruelty appear with disheartening regularity, creating ripples in our own communities.

What motivates these atrocities?

Is human cruelty inevitable?

What could turn the tide?

¹ Ship pin, circa 1950, designed by Henry Wolf and created by his friend, a silversmith apprentice in Lübeck, Germany, and brought to the US aboard the USNS General Harry Taylor, arriving along with the Wolf family on January 4, 1952.

“you want to know [...] whether we want to join you. For us, there could be no greater joy than that, if only you would be successful, or if that great water were not there. Then we could possibly come there.”² –Katusch Blum

A box of letters came into my possession a few years ago. The letters were written in the 1930s and 1940s, by members of my mother's family, who lived in Feketic, Yugoslavia at the time. The letters were sent to Margaretha Gegner Brückner, a relative who had emigrated to Cleveland before World War II, and to her husband and daughter.³ The letters, collected in a box, passed from Aunt Margaretha (my mother's aunt), to her daughter Margaret Shaarda, to her son David, to my mother and father, and finally, in 2010, to me. I think I was the first person to try to read them in 60 years. Reading them is challenging because they were written in ink that has faded, on paper that is deteriorating, with tricky handwriting, and inconsistent spelling, and at times in Swabian, a German dialect. Additionally, my "heritage" understanding of Swabian, and of German, is limited⁴.

I could see among the many letters, one that came from Sombor, in 1947. It was written in my own mother's handwriting, and I became determined to understand what that letter said. I later discovered another from Janoshalma, written by my Tante Katusch in 1948.⁵ I became determined to understand what the letters reveal of the stories my mother told me, and to understand what the letters reveal about the stories of many other people who sent no letters, or whose letters were lost, neglected, or did not survive. I became determined to understand what the letters reveal about people who, in many cases, did not survive. This paper is an attempt to understand the letters, my mother's experience, and how her experience reflects the experiences of many others.

The first letter, written by three siblings (one of whom was my mother), was sent from Sombor, Yugoslavia to Lakewood, Ohio.⁶ At the time of its writing, August 8, 1947, the siblings were all together and being held captive in a forced work camp, one of several such camps that were created in Yugoslavia

² "Letter from Janoshalma January 29, 1948." Katusch Blum to Brückner family. January 29, 1948. Janoshalma, Hungary.

³ On a ship manifest from Hamburg, I located Magaretha Brückner aged 25 of "Fezetysa" arriving in New York, NY on August 31, 1922. The letters in my possession were sent to relatives, Aunt Margaretha Gegner Brückner of Feketic, Yugoslavia, and from this information one can presume this is the same Magaretha Brückner of the manifest.

⁴ Since receiving the letters, I have taken German classes, practiced, and improved.

⁵ The quote above is from the "Letter from Janoshalma January 29, 1948."

⁶ Blum siblings in August of 1947: Liesel–Elisabeth age 17, Katusch–Katarina age 23, and Nikolausz – Nick age 11

near the close of World War II.⁷ The siblings were among the millions of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe who fled, or were forced from their homes at the end of the war.⁸ Circumstances and outcomes for these millions varied widely. In Northern Yugoslavia, Russian soldiers and Yugoslavian partisan troops captured and mistreated many ethnic German civilians and held them in concentration camps until well after World War II ended, as late as Spring of 1948.⁹

There are stories of large-scale human violence of which most Americans know something; The Holocaust, and the attacks of September 11, 2001 are two of these. There are stories of large-scale human violence Americans might know about, such as the Armenian Genocide, the Holodomor, the Nanking Massacre, the Killing Fields, or the Rwandan Genocide.¹⁰ But there are many stories of large-scale human violence that stay quiet, almost secret. The story at the center of the letter from Sombor is the quiet, almost secret kind. I was a pre-adolescent, and it was the late 1960s when my mother (who in the letters is Liesel) first told me her quiet story.¹¹ Since then, fifty years have passed and her story is now mine alone to tell. I have questions I wish I could ask her, but only some of the answers can still be found. I know because I have been digging. Some of the answers are revealed in the letter from Sombor, in Liesel's own voice. I found her among the letters. I found her among letters that crossed the ocean and survived in order to be read, shared, exclaimed and worried over, replied to, acted on, and then tucked away for safekeeping in a box.

The oceans are vast, yet the planet they swell upon is a speck in the limitless universe. All human lives occur in an instant, but for me the quiet story embodied in the letter from Sombor expands to fill all time. I used to think my mother's experience was remarkable. I have since learned that it was not. What is now truly remarkable to me, is how often stories like hers occur, and yet the stories make just the smallest ripples.

The Letter from Sombor

⁷ "Letter from Sombor August 8, 1947." Liesel Blum, Katusch Blum, and Nikolausz Blum to Brückner family. August 08, 1947. Sombor, camp for displaced Germans, Sombor, Yugoslavia.

⁸ Fassman, Heinz, and Rainer Munz. "European East-West Migration 1945-1992." *International Migration Review* 28.3 (1994): 520-538. Pg. 522

⁹ Prokle, Herbert. *Genocide of the Ethnic Germans in Yugoslavia 1944 - 1948*. München: Verl. der Donauschwäbischen Kulturstiftung, 2006.pp 11-12

¹⁰ Armenia, in addition to its current borders once spanned what is now Eastern Turkey and parts of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Iran and Iraq, but during World War One a genocide took place from 1915-1917; The Killing Fields in Cambodia 1975-79; Genocide in Rwanda 1994; Power, Samantha. *"A Problem from Hell," in America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2013):11, 69, and 330; For the Nanking Massacre in China 1937-38 Fogel, Joshua A. *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000): 2; Holodomor in Ukraine 1932-33 Kas'ianov, Georgii. "The Holodomor and the Building of a Nation, in" *Russian Politics and Law* 48, no. 5 (2010): 25-47. doi:10.2753/rup1061-1940480502.

¹¹Mom was long ago known as Liesel. She was born Elisabeth Blum on September 5, 1929 in Feketic, Yugoslavia. From her marriage on January 4, 1956 until her death on January 29, 2015 she was known as Elisabeth Wolf, but to nearly everybody in recent decades, she was Betty.

To be properly chronological, the *Letter from Sombor* belongs in the middle of this story. Instead, I will start by telling you about it here. Questions arise even before contemplating the content of the letter. I wonder how they managed to get paper and pen, and I wonder who helped them to mail the letter to the relatives who lived -in reality and in circumstance- an ocean away. My mother, who was then seventeen, wrote most of the letter. Her older sister and their younger brother added messages to it. It was written on August 18, 1947 while they were inside the Sombor forced work camp in northern Yugoslavia (now Serbia), where at that time they had been held for nearly three years. Of all the letters I found in the box, the *Letter from Sombor* is the only one that my mother wrote. There are no great mysteries for me in it. I grew up knowing part of my mother's story, a story that is painful and personal. The letter reveals details about a story that is so intertwined with mine, it feels as though it is my own.

At the core of the letter are seeming contradictions. The siblings, Liesel, Katusch, and Nikolausz write in turn, and all say they are grateful that they have relatives who still survive and who care for them, and they sprinkle the letter with endearments. Liesel shares their darkest news, which is that they know, "we already have no mother and maybe also no longer have a father."¹² Katusch also writes of about their mother's last days, that they "know of the hunger our dear mother suffered." Although he was with their mother when she died, "little Nikolausz tells us, but we are not allowed to cry or he says not a word."¹³ Throughout the letter, the three siblings swing from ordinary, cheerful, letter-writing conventions with expressions of love, joy, and hope, to dark despair and sorrow. These transitions sometimes occur within the same sentence, as when Katusch writes "We laughed and cried with joy that we still have you in life, that we felt so lost and thought we no longer had anyone."¹⁴ She writes in this style again later in the letter, when she congratulates her newlywed cousin Margaret Brückner Shaarda and her husband John, "The dear God should also be with you, so that it remains so forever, because now we know at best how beautiful it is to be happy and content; we so poorly blessed, our beautiful youth destroyed."¹⁵ Even eleven year-old Nikolausz says, "I am still well and am living, though I could tell you difficult things that I have survived, but this letter is so little."¹⁶ Liesel's portion of the letter follows the same disorienting pattern, but alternates less rapidly. She includes more bleak sentences like these: "Sometimes the sun shines so darkly or not at all. It often presses on us severely as if the whole sky were upon us."¹⁷ She dares to express her wish for her own life to end, though she believes that wish to be sinful, She follows that darkness with good wishes, and love, in this passage:

It causes us suffering and great sorrow, because she must certainly know exactly how poor we are, with clothes and all, that we got absolutely nothing from anywhere. If you could just see us once, how poor we must walk on this earth. Or why must we even still live when it must be this way? It is truly a sin to say, but finally still not astounding, that when one had to survive so much already in these beautiful young years, the joy of all life lost. But always and still now it has

¹² Nick Blum died not long after WWII ended, most likely in 1946, while he was a POW in either Fallingbostel or Sandbostel, Germany. -According to my father, Henry Wolf, who learned this from his own father (who was also a POW in a near location). -from a Fall 2010 phone interview. Quote from "Letter from Sombor August 8, 1947."

¹³ "Letter from Sombor August 8, 1947."

¹⁴ IBID

¹⁵ IBID

¹⁶ IBID

¹⁷ IBID

started and will not end. One blow after another lands on us and sadly we can't change it. We just have to hold on and wait. It is said after rain sunshine. So, if our Lord God helps maybe it will be so again with us. Now our loves, I wish you all everything good and will hope that our letter reaches you in good health. I will slowly close with many greetings, and kisses from us all.¹⁸

They write of their hopes for the future: Liesel wishes to obtain the few things the relatives sent that came into the possession of Ilonkkaneni, an old neighbor; Katusch dreams they will find a way to get “over the wire,” to where others have already gone, and join their Uncle Adam, and his family;¹⁹ and Nikolausz wishes to play in the woods with his cousin, Brigitte.²⁰ They write of gratitude, and of the consolation provided by receiving a letter from the relatives in Ohio.

Of their hunger, Liesel writes that they get “from nowhere nothing to bring in, only what we receive, and of food it is really bitter little. It is not enough for sustenance when we have nothing else.”²¹ Lack of food is critical at the time the letter is written. At times prior to the letter’s writing, they were able to work outside during the “almost three years trapped here far from all relatives and acquaintances.”²²

At one point Liesel writes of a woman named Rusicka Elisabeht, saying, “...you may already know that she sought a more beautiful and better freedom.”²³ I, and most people who have read the letter, understand that to mean the Rusicka Elisabeht had died at her own hands. But in fact, Henry Wolf assures me that she lived.²⁴ Liesel provides an address where the Brückners can send mail for them to someone named Hajmasi Jakob, and Katusch closes her message with this note, “A nice greeting from Heinrich Klosz and his mother and Gredelsgot Schulhause.” Heinrich Klosz is mentioned again in the *Letter from Janoshalma*.²⁵ Katusch relays her “great joy that after twenty months our dearest little brother has come to us, that we no longer believed possible.”²⁶ In a subsequent letter from Janoshalma, Hungary, Katusch writes about the quest they undertook to reunite with their brother.

The Blum Family’s “Trail of Sorrows”

There was only one letter dated after the *Letter from Sombor* in the box that came to me. This letter, dated January 29, 1948, was written to the Brückner family, from Katusch while she was in Janoshalma, Hungary. In it, Katusch replies to questions, with dates and details about what she calls their “trail of sorrows.”

¹⁸ IBID

¹⁹ “Over the wire” here means escape from Sombor to Hungary, specifically to their Uncle Adam Gegner, the youngest sibling of their mother, and the brother of the aunt to whom the letter is written.

²⁰ Brigitte is Adam Gegner’s daughter. Remarkably, only the smallest of these hopes did not come true.

²¹ “Letter from Sombor August 8, 1947.”

²² Held captive in various camps by Yugoslavian partisans.

²³ “Letter from Sombor August 8, 1947.”

²⁴ She is the woman who in my childhood I had known as Lissya Zuschlag, and whose Pennsylvania farm my family often visited. Her daughter, Lissbet was a favorite playmate of mine.

²⁵ “Letter from Janoshalma January 29, 1948.”

²⁶ “Letter from Sombor August 8, 1947.”

October 1944 Russians and partisans came. Now I want to tell you briefly about our time in the camps. January 16, 1945 was our fateful day when we got into our neighboring village Sekitch, into camp, where we were still with our dear mother and Nick until October 1, 1945. Then the able-bodied were selected to stay there and work. Those not able to work, such as mothers and children, including our dear mother and Nick were sent to a ver...²⁷ camp in Kruschevlje. There our dear mother, as so many others, died of starvation in March 1946. So now Nicklaus was alone, though other aunts were still there. After two months they commanded that such lone children had to report, and he too was dragged away.

Liesel and I remained in Sekitch until March 1946. Then we were moved to the state-owned farm near Subotica. We were there already three months after Mother's death when we heard that we are motherless. I gave all I had to a woman to see if it were possible to bring Nikolausz to us. But he was no longer there, and nobody knew where they had taken him. By chance we heard that he was nearby in Petrvoselo, but by the time we inquired he was moved away again. We continued our search until we find out that he was in Slovenia, Ljubljana. We were put in a camp at Subotica January 14, 1947 for 14 days. Then we came to Sombor. We could not rest in our search for our dear brother. Finally we learned from his teachers that he was in Ljubljana and on May 20, 1947 we made a request for reunification. We had a good commander, and with the help of pharmacist Heinrich Klosz and on June 30, 1947 Nick came back to us. That was a great joy in the camp. We went away from the camp on September 11, 1947 and are at this place Janoshalma, Hungary to this day. So my dears, I gave you a short description of our trail of sorrows.²⁸

In reply to another question, Katusch writes, "you want to know [...] whether we want to join you. For us, there could be no greater joy than that, if only you would be successful, or if that great water were not there. Then we could possibly come there."²⁹ Towards the end of the letter Katusch emphatically reiterates her hope that the Brückners will be successful in arranging their overseas passage, saying, "Good luck with your intentions!"³⁰ This wish, to overcome the giant obstacle of "that great water," required navigating a formidable ocean, and navigating immigration bureaucracy. The letter from Janoshalma provides a wealth of specifics, and those specifics parallel stories about the events told by others, including details Nikolausz Blum shared with me in January 2013, sixty-five years later.

Ultimately the three siblings escaped Sombor, initially to Hungary. From there they and their relatives, the Gegners (Adam was my grandmother Blum's brother) were for a time in Austria, where Nikolausz attended fifth grade. Katusch married Johann Hellermann and they travelled with Nikolausz to Bavaria, where Helga was born. Liesel remained in Austria, where she worked in a hotel. The Brückners (Margaretha, nee Blum, was my grandmother Blum's sister) sponsored

²⁷ I presume she meant verdampte, meaning damned, which was considered swearing.

²⁸ "Letter from Janoshalma January 29, 1948."

²⁹ IBID

³⁰ IBID

the family to come to the US. Liesel emigrated first by herself from Austria on the USS General S.D. Sturgis in March of 1952. The Hellermanns and Nikolausz came from Germany in June.³¹

Throughout the “trail of sorrows” the siblings’ connection to each other, and to their remaining closest relatives was at the forefront of their letter writing. That connection was a lifelong value of theirs. Indeed, the connection evidenced in the letters by the siblings to the Brückners proved to be a lifeline that stretched 5,000 miles, maybe saving their lives, and certainly ultimately making my own life possible.³²

Before “Our Fateful Day”³³

All my life, when my family talked of the past, the stories were centered on “*da’hame*,” meaning “back home.” For all of my relatives, *da’hame* was synonymous with Feketic. Their village called Feketic, was variously known also as Bácsfeketehegy, Feketitsch, Schwarzenberg, and Crno Brdo. In English all of those names translate to “Black Mountain.” There was no mountain. Feketic is in the Batschka region, in the northernmost part of what is now Serbia.

The Batschka is where many Germans, including my ancestors, settled roughly 200 years before the letter from Sombor was written. Wikipedia defines the Batschka region as “a geographical and historical area within the Pannonian Plain bordered by the river Danube to the west and south, and by the river Tisza to the east. It is divided between Serbia and Hungary. Most of the area is located within the Vojvodina region in Serbia, and Novi Sad, the capital of Vojvodina, lies on the border between Bačka and Syrmia. The smaller northern part of the geographical area is located within Bács-Kiskun County, in Hungary.”

Any German Feketic schoolchild of Liesel’s day would have learned in school, some version of their local history, perhaps very like this version from the Swabian Trek website:

Turks entered the Batschka region in the early 1500s and by 1529 all of the Batschka was in Turkish hands. Hunger followed and the survivors were shipped in boats down the Danube on their way to lifetime of slavery. The Turks made some attempts at repopulating the Batschka mostly with Slavs but did so only sparsely.³⁴

Fortunately for my German ancestors,

In 1689 the Turks were driven out of the Batschka. As early as 1686 Sombor was taken by the Imperial Army and all of the Batschka became a war zone. The Sultan Suleiman faced Charles of Lorraine at the battles in Sombor and Batsch and the Turks retreated from the Batschka. With the Banat and Srem still in their hands the Turks tried to retake the Batschka. The Batschka was

³¹ Pieced together information from notes from conversation author interview with Nikolausz (Nick) Blum, January 3, 2013

³² 5,000 miles is the rough distance from Feketic to Ohio.

³³ "Letter from Janoshalma January 29, 1948

³⁴ From website www.swabiantrek.com/?cat=12 Confirmed by Henry Wolf, by phone.

totally devastated in these battles and turned into swamplands, forests and was depopulated and the surviving population was totally impoverished.³⁵

This event created an opportunity for landless Germans. Queen Maria Theresa of the Hapsburg Empire, allowed Catholic Germans to migrate to the area, and acquire property for themselves.³⁶ Some years later, Emperor Joseph II became King of the region, and he broadened the opportunities to include Protestants, who were dismayed on arrival to find that the Catholics had acquired the best land, and the land available for the good future-Feketicers was a swamp. So, they literally drained the swamp.³⁷ According to family lore, the good Feketicers struggled, and thrived. They were very hard-working, smart, cooperative, joyful, handsome, grateful, and pious for about 150 years.³⁸ This idyll for the ethnic Germans of Feketic ended in October 1944 when the Russians and the Yugoslavian partisans came.³⁹

First-hand Accounts of *Landsleit* from *Da'hame*

The prewar ethnic German population of Feketic was approximately 2,000. Such a small population would have been able to know what happened to other villagers. They were all tied together somehow: relatives, friends, friends of friends, friends of relatives, relatives of friends. They would know who got away, and who did not, and what happened to whom. The people of Feketic had some shared habits of speech that were stylistic phrasings. In first-hand accounts, the phrase, "a good beating" occurs frequently. These reporters do not mean that the beating is a good thing. They mean it is a thorough, intense and terrible beating. Another common convention of their speech is to preface a person's first name with their family name, or their position. Thus, for example, Liesel was Blum Liesel, and Uncle Adam Gegner was usually referred to as "Schoolteacher Uncle." Heinrich Klosz would be referred to as Pharmacist Heinrich Klosz.

Heinrich Klosz is mentioned in the *Letter from Sombor*, again in the *Letter from Janoshalma*, and once more written about in the first-hand account of Jacob Göettel titled, "Documentary." I remember my mother telling me a story about him and that phrase "pharmacist Heinrich Klosz" makes him stand out in my memory. In the story she told me, her hands were cracked and bleeding, chapped from the cold, and she had no way to treat them. The pharmacist recommended that she urinate on her hands and the urea would improve them. At the time the whole thing sounded really far-fetched to me, but after some investigating I discovered that it is true, and think it is likely something a pharmacist might know. In a recent conversation, I had with my cousin Helga,⁴⁰ she told me that pharmacist Heinrich Klosz once came to visit our family in Ohio in the late 1970s. I do not remember that. Talking to my dad in early April, he told me his memories of pharmacist Henry Klosz too. Dad told me that when the partisans came, Heinrich

³⁵ IBID

³⁶ Feketitsch in Batschka." DVHH.org. Accessed March & April 2017.
<http://www.dvhh.org/feketitsch/book/index.htm>.
 Translation into English of Die Deutschen der Gemeinde Feketic pg. 11

³⁷ Oft-told family tale, mostly by my father, but also other relatives.

³⁸ IBID

³⁹ "Letter from Janoshalma January 29, 1948

⁴⁰ phone interview with Helga Hellermann Noffsinger on April 8, 2017

Klosz was a particular target because he was educated. He was severely beaten and very nearly killed.⁴¹ I found corroboration in the first-hand account “Documentary” made in 1952 by Jakob Göettel, a survivor from Feketic, of the events in Feketic beginning in October 1944, until his escape from captivity in August 1947.⁴² Heinrich Klosz appears twice in Göettel’s telling. First in the second paragraph here:

On the 17th of November, 1944 [...] partisans came [...] even the pharmacist Heinrich Kloss was interrogated by a female partisan and several other partisans. The female partisan ordered that pharmacist Kloss lay on the table. His jacket was taken off beforehand. A partisan sat himself at the head of the pharmacist, he had his hands under his face, two other partisans held him at the feet, and a fourth beat him with the horse whip from the ankles to the neck. Already at the first dreadful beating the pharmacist cried out loud. I saw him after he received 45 such blows.⁴³

And he writes of him again in his sixth paragraph:

They always took pharmacist Heinrich Kloss first. They did it in an especially sadistic way. They said that he was the first to receive a beating yesterday and he is a good man and was never to be blamed and stroked his face. At once they began to curse him and punch him in the face, and then thrashed him with the batons where they always struck him. Then came our turn.⁴⁴

Heinrich Klosz, played a critical role for Liesel and Katusch and Nikolausz during their "trail of sorrows." While at first Heinrich Klosz was nearly beaten to death, ultimately he was released, because, according to my father, his skills as a pharmacist were necessary to the partisans.⁴⁵ Eventually Heinrich Klosz was even able to manage to get a car and, at least sometimes, travel from Feketic to Sombor to keep in touch with members of the community.⁴⁶ In her *Letter from Janoshalma*, Katusch specifies that pharmacist Heinrich Klosz assisted in getting Nikolausz back. How else did he help? Maybe he provided the means to send a letter. Or maybe that was Hajmasi Jakob, the person to whom Liesel asked that letters for them be sent. There were people who helped. And there were people, like Ilonkaneini, who did not perhaps simply out of fear. From my safe distance, I am certain what I would do. But can I know really? How does anyone untested know?

In his report, Göettel details inhumane conditions: inadequate food and shelter, beatings, torture, forced work and being sold, mandated death quotas, and killings. Göettel’s forthright testimony contrasts distinctly with his reticence to shame the victim in this description, “One day a young attractive woman from Sarmia was so beaten because she did not want to *go in the high corn* with the deputy commandant.” The delicacy with which Göettel addresses rape, or attempted rape here, leads me to believe that to him this might be the most reprehensible of all he has witnessed and experienced.

I wonder about the names that adorn Göettel’s telling: “81 year-old Jakob Weissman and 70 year-old Jakob Hoffman,” and more: Freitag, Paul, Dr. Tauss, Riesz, Kaufman’s apprentice Desko, Dietrich, Mrs.

⁴¹ short phone interview with Henry Wolf on 4/2/2017

⁴² report by Mr. Jakob Göettel, dated 2/15/1952, titled “Documentary,” found here:

<http://www.dvhh.org/feketitsch/documentary.htm>

⁴³ report by Mr. Jakob Göettel

⁴⁴ report by Mr. Jakob Göettel

⁴⁵ Short phone interview with Henry Wolf on 4/2/2017

⁴⁶ The distance from Feketic to Sombor is approximately 40 miles.

Bender, Liebesperger, Schwebler. These are names of those who had peopled Liesel's village, *landsleit*.⁴⁷ Göettel tells of the deputy camp commandant, Desko "The Red," who was their sadistic nemesis, awakening more questions, some unanswerable. Did Liesel and her family, somehow manage to evade The Red's attention? What attention did he pay them? I asked my father what he knew of these names.⁴⁸ Most of the names in Goettel's "Documentary" were names that my father remembered from classmates and neighbors of his childhood. Jakob Weissman could have been his aunt's father, Hoffman could have been Justina Hoffman's father, and grandfather to his classmate Hans. Andrea Riesz was father of Johann, the husband of Helen. Helen had advised the family that my uncle could avoid being drafted at sixteen by volunteering for the paratroopers, because the paratrooper enlistment age was eighteen.⁴⁹ Adam Schwebler might have been an uncle of his best friend. The Pauls had a bakery. Dr. Tauss's practice was in Sekitch. Yes, my father knew about Desko, but he knew him as Bashko. Bashko was a sales apprentice at Dietrich's store, and worked with my father's Aunt Maria Wolf. When the partisans took power, Bashko wanted to kill the Dietrichs, but they managed to flee.

I never knew the woman in the letters as Leisel. During my life, many people in our family called her Lissya, and to most everyone else she was Betty. I look at the picture of her from when she was about eight, and then I look at the picture of her from when she was about twenty-one. I see her face and I think, "that girl hasn't really changed." But our faces don't reveal all our mysteries. I wonder if the qualities that she had when she was my mother, were qualities Liesel had before her whole life changed. Are they what helped her survive, or the scars of that survival? I suspect some of both. I see her in this story she once told me of the time before the partisans came. Liesel was preparing to make her confirmation and missed a class to help her mom, who was sick. The pastor later punished her for missing the class by giving her a whipping. She said to him that she couldn't stop him hitting her, but when she finished the required classes, he'd never see her in his church again. Later, when she was in the forced work camp, and he was not, he offered to ask for her to work in his home.⁵⁰ She said no, turning her back on both kinds of being saved, and stayed with her family. Skepticism, determination, the need to be in control, loyalty, a strong sense of justice; that was Liesel before, and that was my mother, too.

Liesel turned fifteen in Feketic on Sept 5, 1944. Justina Hoffman, a woman of the village,⁵¹ provided testimony about what happened the following month.⁵² Dates in her testimony confirm dates in Jakob Göettel's "Documentary," and also in Katush's *Letter from Janoshalma*. Justina Hoffman's testimony provides a picture of what is likely to have happened to the Blum family.

⁴⁷ Meaning in English, "people from back home" or literally, "land's people."

⁴⁸ Phone interview with Henry Wolf, April 13, 2017

⁴⁹ Uncle Adam volunteered for the paratroopers. The war and draft ended before he was 18.

⁵⁰ Forced workers were hired out. They did not receive the payments.

⁵¹ Henry Wolf remarked, in a March 25, 2017 phone conversation, that Justina Hoffman's son Hans was in school with him. Hans was one year older, and in the same class as Liesel. Henry Wolf grew up in the same village as my mother, but had already left it before the war's end.

⁵² De, Zayas Alfred M. *A Terrible Revenge: the Ethnic Cleansing of the East European Germans*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. pp 100-102

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. Further testimony from Justina Hoffman describes her removal to, and conditions in, the camp at Sekic, where Liesel, Katusch, Nikolausz, and their mother Katarina, were also held.

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.

Liesel and Katusch were separated from their mother and brother. Again, Justina Hoffman's description provides detail of how this separation likely occurred.

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 thousand starved to death. Since I was among the able-bodied, they kept me back at Sekic.

Liesel and Katusch, being able-bodied, young women remained at the forced labor camp in Sekic, and were later moved to Sombor. The sisters told me some stories of their time in the camp at Sekic. Liesel told me that when she and Katusch arrived in the camp at Sekic they each had one coat, and they slept with no bed or bedding, just on the hard floor. The two sisters would lie down on one coat and share the other as their blanket. In the cold winters, there was no heat except from their own bodies. They were unbearably cold and Liesel believed that the shared coats and body heat prevented them from freezing to death. Many people did die in the camp.⁵³ Liesel lived on the threshold of starvation on a daily basis. She became so thin she stopped having periods and her body so ravaged that she lost many of her teeth. She said there are stories of that time she would never tell; too horrible to relive, too horrible to burden me with.

Liesel's mother and Nikolausz were taken to a camp called Krushevlje. Survivors described the camp at Krushevlje and others like it as "starvation," "liquidation" or "death" camps. And in fact, Katarina Blum

⁵³ estimates range from 309-400. Prokle, Herbert. *Genocide of the Ethnic Germans in Yugoslavia 1944 - 1948*. München: Verl. der Donauschwäbischen Kulturstiftung, 2006. Pg 164

died in Kruschevlje, most likely of starvation.⁵⁴ Estimates of the number who died at Kruschevlje range from 2000 to 3500.⁵⁵ Eight-year-old Nikolausz 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.”⁵⁶ Katusch, with help, was able to orchestrate his return to them nearly two years later.

Upheaval after World War II in Feketic, and Beyond

In 1936, Feketic was home to roughly 6000 people, about two-thirds of which were Hungarians; a handful Serbians and other ethnicities, and one-third German Danube Swabians whose predecessors had settled in that area long before. Of the German villagers of Feketic, 107 men, ages ranging from 16 to 60, had died as German soldiers. 355 other German villagers died of the consequences of forced removal. One out of four of the ethnic Germans of the village did not survive.⁵⁷

My father, Henry Wolf, who was then then 13, and his immediate family were able to escape ahead of the occupation. Liesel and her family though, were caught up in a wave of upheaval that was taking place across the European continent, at the end of and just after, World War II. Throughout Eastern Europe, Soviet troops and local army units forced roughly 15 million people, many of them ethnic Germans, to leave their homes. Of these, nearly two million died.⁵⁸ Additionally, troops arrested several hundred thousand German civilians in Eastern European countries, and transferred them to internment camps. Many of those imprisoned died and the survivors existed under unimaginable misery.⁵⁹

In Yugoslavia, Russian soldiers, along with Yugoslavian Marshall Josip Broz Tito’s partisan troops visited retaliation upon ethnic German civilian populations under their control. Approximately 250,000, Yugoslavian Germans managed to flee ahead of these forces.⁶⁰ Of the approximate 200,000 who did not escape, nearly 10,000 were murdered in Fall 1944, about 12,000 were deported to hard labor in the Soviet

⁵⁴ My paternal great-grandmother Wolf died there as well

⁵⁵ Prokle, Herbert. *Genocide of the Ethnic* Pg116

⁵⁶ Andor, Ingrid. *Bread on My Mother's Table: a Danube Swabian Remembers*. New York: IUniverse, 2007. Pg 91

⁵⁷ From notes of a conversation with my father, Henry Wolf in 2010. He looked figures up in the Feketic Book, printed in 1936 for Feketic’s 150 anniversary. Pratscher, Viktor. *Die Deutschen der Gemeinde Feketić-Feketitsch: e. gemischtsprach. Gemeinde in Jugoslawien mit dt. Minderheit*. S.l.: Verein zur Pflege Donauschwäb. Heimatkunde, Heimatortsgemeinschaft Sekitsch, 1982.

⁵⁸ Rummel, R. J. *Death by Government*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transactions, 1994. Pg. 298

⁵⁹ Ther, Philipp, and Ana Siljak. "The Mechanics of Ethnic Cleansing." *Redrawing Nations: Ethnic Cleansing in East-Central Europe, 1944-1948*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001. pp 2-4

⁶⁰ Prokle, Herbert. *Genocide of the Ethnic* Pg 155

Union, and the rest were concentrated in labor and liquidation camps.⁶¹ These Germans' property and valuables were appropriated.⁶² Their mistreatment included forced travel, incarceration,⁶³ and enslavement,⁶⁴ harsh and murderous treatment, savage and deadly beatings, and rape.⁶⁵ They endured shortages of 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.⁶⁶ Imprisoned in these "lethal camps... internees were left to starve slowly to death."⁶⁷

Making a "Clean Sweep"

Decisions made by powerful people on the world stage, indeed across oceans, and far from where our small family tragedy took place, shaped the outcome that still ripples in my own life. 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."⁶⁸ 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 to Eastern European Germans after the war was "carried out under the auspices ... of the international community?"⁶⁹ Stalin wanted to expel Germans, and the US and Britain hoped to reign in their brutal expulsions and revenge attacks, and establish a more peaceful and restrained process. The "orderly transfer" of German populations was explicitly authorized in the Potsdam Agreement, resulting in the forced removal of twelve million ethnic Germans from parts of East-Central Europe.⁷⁰ The Yalta agreement permitted 'reparations-in-kind' which served as justification for the enslavement of millions of ethnic Germans.⁷¹ Germany's actions during the war had stirred anger and revulsion toward Germany, which might have helped override any qualms that Western leaders may have

⁶¹ Prokle, Herbert. *Genocide of the Ethnic* Pg 95

⁶² Prokle, Herbert. *Genocide of the Ethnic* Pg. 44

⁶³ Bessel, Richard, and Claudia B. . Haake. "Forced Removal in the Modern World and Explaining Forced Migration." Introduction. *Removing Peoples Forced Removal in the Modern World.*(Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009):420

⁶⁴ Ther, Philipp, and Ana Siljak. "The Mechanics of Ethnic Cleansing." Pg 1

⁶⁵ Rummel, R. J. *Death by Government*(New Brunswick, NJ: Transactions, 1994): 299

⁶⁶ Ther, Philipp, and Ana Siljak. "The Mechanics of Ethnic Cleansing." Pg 2

⁶⁷ Rummel, R. J. *Death by Government*. Pg 300

⁶⁸ Naimark, Norman M. *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-century Europe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001. Pg 110

⁶⁹ Ther pg 4

⁷⁰ "Excerpts from the Report on the Potsdam Conference (Potsdam Agreement) (August 2, 1945)." German History in Documents and Images.

⁷¹ "Report of the Yalta (Crimea) Conference (February 4-11, 1945)." German History in Documents and Images.

had about expelling millions of ethnic Germans. 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 wishes.⁷² 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.⁷³

Turning the Tide on Human Cruelty

Shailja Patel wrote about Kenya in her poetic memoir, *Migritude*, "Less than twenty years before I was born, there was a gulag in my country."⁷⁴ and "...barbed wire villages where forced labor, starvation and death were routine."⁷⁵ Those words could have been written by me while thinking about my ancestral home, or by others about other places long ago, or as recently as today. Long before Liesel's family was forced out of their then-Yugoslavian (now Serbian) village, her ancestors migrated there to try to find a way to make a life. Even then there were global pressures that affected their decisions to transplant themselves. The offer of land ownership to a landless family was to a king's benefit, but was also decisive for the families that took the offer. Choices made in meeting rooms far from the little lives of my ancestors had an impact on them over 200 years ago. Choices made in meeting rooms forced the relocation/ethnic cleansing/genocide of ethnic Germans/my family in Eastern Europe after World War II. Choices made in meeting rooms are still causing mortal harm in the lives of people regarded by decision makers as expendable. Choices that ripple through generations

Stories about humans struggling with displacement, torture, enslavement, and genocide are not stories just of the past. I am often struck by stories of suffering strangers from distant parts of the globe, and more so when I have a connection to people these stories brush against: my niece Sarah, a nurse who participates in annual trips to perform heart surgery in Rwanda; or my childhood friend Steph, another nurse who travels to Guatemala to provide health care; or my friend Cindy, an ESL teacher who works with students who have come as refugees with their families to St Paul from Myanmar. Cindy posted this comment on Facebook, on March 16, 2017, along with a news item headlined, "*Refugees from Myanmar Hurt Most by Trump Cuts*"

Such a sad situation for my students and their families who are refugees because of civil war in their home country of Burma (now Myanmar), and were persecuted simply because of their ethnicity. Many ran from soldiers who burned their villages, raped women, killed and maimed their family members, stole men and boys for forced servitude in these same armies. They traveled long distances through forests without much to eat. They gave up everything to live and now have a second chance in the US or other countries to live without fear.⁷⁶

⁷² Ther. Pg 5-6

⁷³ Rummel 299

⁷⁴ Patel, Shailja. *Migritude*. New York: Kaya Press, 2010. Pg 15

⁷⁵ IBID pg 17

⁷⁶ A link to the article that may be found here: <http://www.voanews.com/a/refugees-from-myanmar-hurt-most-by-trump-cuts/3768538.html> Comments shared with permission.

Human cruelty also ripples in the lives of former and current students at Macalester College.⁷⁷ Current student Farah Al-Haddad worked as a translator for Syrian refugees, many of whom had just gone through harrowing emigration experiences and were beginning the lengthy process of reuniting their families.⁷⁸ Another current student, Bo Kim drove ambulances for Red Crescent in Israel and Palestine in Spring and Summer of 2016. Of that experience Bo said, “What came out of that was incredible respect for those who live under oppression.”⁷⁹ Rick Leckowick, who graduated in 2004, works with Yezidi Iraqis who are the victims of a recent genocide in Iraq. Many of the women experience sexual enslavement and human trafficking at the hands of ISIL.⁸⁰

Stories of human cruelty appear with disheartening regularity. Just this week, these headlines were published in the Sunday edition of the local newspaper: “More than 100 killed during Syria populations transfer,” about refugees bombed on their buses outside Aleppo while attempting to reach safe haven; and “Italy rescues 2,000 migrants,” about refugees fleeing to Italy from sub-Saharan Africa.⁸¹ What is the motivation behind these atrocities that happen with monotonous regularity? Historian Eric Weitz proposes, “race and violence became linked to the massive political aims of revolutionary movements and states, a new development of the twentieth century. Revolutions were social projects; they mobilized populations for economic development and literacy campaigns, for political repression and population purges.”⁸² Perhaps that is so, but is human cruelty inevitable? Or what could turn the tide?

If that Great Water were not There

“No one is actually dead until the ripples they cause in the world die away.” -Terry Pratchett

I have attempted to tell Liesel’s story in the context of history, and to explain history through her story, believing that if each of us turned our most painful stories into understanding and compassion for others, there might be fewer painful stories. I tell my mother’s story also in part to keep my memory of her strong, maybe relying on a brain characteristic I once heard about on the radio. The segment explained that processes during sleep act on the brain the way waves do along a shore. I looked for something about this on-line, and found this line in *“Secret Life of Sleep”* by Kat Duff.

Giulio Tononi and his colleague Chiara Cirelli at the University of Wisconsin, Madison propose that the large slow waves that dominate SW sleep wash the board clean by reducing the number of active connections, while the brief bursts of faster activity, called ripples, inscribe new learning. They work together to enable new memories to stand out clearly.

I think I will close my eyes tonight and my slow wave sleep will wash away the useless clutter, and my bursts of ripples will inscribe only thought gems, leaving my mind clear and brilliant. It could happen. Waves and ripples work as we sleep to consolidate memory.

⁷⁷ Stories that appeared on the Macalester College website in recent months.

⁷⁸ <https://www.macalester.edu/news/2017/03/refugee-responders/>

⁷⁹ IBID

⁸⁰ <https://www.macalester.edu/news/2017/01/from-macalester-to-mosul/>

⁸¹ The St Paul Pioneer Press. Sunday April 16, 2017 pg 2A and 8A

⁸² Eric Weitz, “The Modernity of Genocides: War Race and Revolution in the 20th Century,” in *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*, Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 57.

Long before Liesel and her family were driven from their home, Ottoman Turks were driven from that same region. Peace mostly reigned there for a few centuries, ending in Feketic in October 1944. Strife in the region did not end with the “clean sweep” made by removing the ethnic Germans. By the turn of the twenty-first century, Yugoslavia was war-torn once again. The massive killing that then occurred in some regions of Yugoslavia was not judged to be genocide by the United Nations Court, but by many in the public sphere.⁸³ The courts of powerful countries, and the decisions they make, travel the globe, and lives hang on those decisions. Sometimes the powerful are helpful. Sometimes there is no help to be had. Sometimes help is in the hands of someone far away.

For my family, help was summoned with letters. What a magical thing, to conjure a brighter future using words on paper. What a magical thing to reply to a question with, “you want to know [...] whether we want to join you. For us, there could be no greater joy than that, if only you would be successful, or if that great water were not there. Then we could possibly come there”⁸⁴ and have your wish come true. What a magical thing to write away the obstacle of the ocean, “that great water” and have your own words, one day carry where you dreamed of going.

Liesel’s last European home was in Ostermeithing, Austria where she worked as a maid in Koenig’s Hotel.⁸⁵ Ostermeithing was an interim, safe-landing-place where she gathered her strength, and recovered from the worst of her personal ordeal. She could have stayed in Ostermeithing. In Ostermeithing, she became engaged to an Austrian boy. And there, she also managed the bureaucratic hoops that cleared the way for the trip to the United States. For her, the pulls to America were the relatives who had inspired hope in her darkest days, and the chance to live in the same place as closest remaining family. The fiance had promised to follow her. Instead he chose not to leap into the unknown, from the home that he had always known. The pull of Liesel was not enough. He broke off the engagement, long after she had made the trip across the ocean.

Liesel crossed the ocean five years after her *Letter from Sombor* did. She crossed the Atlantic as a passenger on the USNS General Sturgis, and arrived in New York harbor on March 15, 1952.⁸⁶ She got on a train to Cleveland. She spoke no English, and according to her own account she traveled to her destination with instructions written in English pinned to her clothing.⁸⁷ The suitcase she carried had an address painted on it: Liesel Blum, c/o Jakob Brückner, 1539 Rosewood Avenue, Lakewood 7 Ohio, U.S.A.⁸⁸ A few months later Katusch, Nikolausz, Johann and Helga joined her there. With Magaretha and Jakob Brückner, and Margaret and John Shaarda they found a nurturing place to be, and to begin together again.

⁸³ <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=21672#.WPbCGXDWTPo>

⁸⁴ "Letter from Janoshalma January 29, 1948."

⁸⁵ From memories of conversations with author’s mother.

⁸⁶ Ship Manifest USNS General S.D. Sturgis, arriving New York City on March 15, 1952. Elisabeth (Liesel) Blum is the eighteenth entry. From ancestry.com

⁸⁷ From memories of conversations with author’s mother.

⁸⁸ The suitcase that is now, and has for several years been, tucked under my bed.

The Atlantic, the ocean that carried my mother's letter to her family, and five years later also carried her to her family, was impassive. It held them apart and brought them together, and in its ceaseless, careless movement, the ocean has done the same for countless others.

Heimat ist im Innern, mehr als bloss Erinnern, bleibt drum unzerstört –Jakob Wolf⁸⁹
Home is inside, more than just memories, thus remains undestroyed –translation by Herta Wolf Pitman

⁸⁹ Jakob Wolf is Henry Wolf's uncle, my great uncle.

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Letter from Sombor⁹⁰

August 8, 1947

Our dear uncle, aunt, and cousins⁹¹

Now again after a long while we want to direct a few lines to you, our dears. That we have finally received a first letter from you and the letter promised money, 1000 dinar, for which our dears, we want to thank you most heartily. Oh, you can just not imagine how great our joy was as we received your dear letter, from which we poor ones took great consolation. What kind of strength and courage for our continuing existence, the always hard, poorer and more meaningless existence that we have now on this earth, have we once again gained from what you wrote. Yes, so it just is, or unfortunately it goes for us here, that we now had no one far and wide on this great earth. It is in this great sadness, only the greatest joy to hear something from someone anywhere. We had no longer believed that we would ever again hear from you. And yet it has become true. So, we see that someone is still alive for us when we were now already so lost and unlucky in this difficult time when we are left without a mother. We prayed our dear Lord that he might keep you for us, when we already have no mother and maybe also no longer have a father, and almost three years trapped here far from all relatives and acquaintances. Sometimes the sun shines so darkly or not at all. It often presses on us severely as if the whole sky were upon us. Yet we must and want to hope that for us it will become once again better on this great earth. Sadly, it still goes just ever so slowly. But the longer it still takes, so the worse it gets. Because until now it was better as we worked outside. But now we've been rather long inside and get from nowhere nothing to bring in, only what we receive, and of food it is really bitter little. It is not enough for sustenance when we have nothing else.

Well I was, and am now back again, on self-taken vacation at home! By our good neighbor, Ilonkaneni. But actually, almost completely unexpectedly, I wanted, or it was because of looking for food, bacon or fat. However, she could give me nothing. And still we are in here so long with from nowhere anything. Of clothes that means we have nothing, totally in rags. And by her there were still three dresses we left that I wanted to get. But she couldn't do that either, as she looked but she couldn't find. But she gave me one dress from you. I saw on a package your return address, only she didn't say from where or how she got the three packages. I saw it without her knowing that it was from you. One package of clothes with your return address, one with uncle Jacob's brother John in Feketic, Yugoslavia at the time. The letters were sent to relatives, Aunt Margaretha Gegner Brückner's shoes, and the third with food, but I couldn't see who sent that one. The packages were sent to Ruszicka Elisabeht. As you may already know that she sought a more beautiful and better freedom. So, the dear neighbor must have somehow gotten the package, but didn't say a word about it. She must certainly have known I'd claim something from it since she knows right well how poor we are standing. Do you see she has such a heart that we never thought of her. Unfortunately, that's how people are now here, the ones that are still the nearest to us, don't help out. Then too, she would think "I could also use it. And why should I give to her? She won't know." And it

⁹⁰ Liesel, Katusch, and Nikolausz Blum, letter from Sombor, Yugoslavia to Brückner family, August 8, 1947.
English translation by Henry Wolf and Herta Pitman

⁹¹ Letter was written to the Brückner family, which included Magaretha Gegner Brückner (the sister of the sibling's mother, her husband Jakob Brückner, their daughter Margaret Brückner Shaarda, and her husband John Shaarda.

could also, what I wish on no one, one day get this bad or even worse for her. So may God be on her side. Then she might be sorry and regret. Now I want to ask you our beloveds that if you want that, since Elisabeth is no longer here, you could tell her to give those things to us. So please write to her, but not that we told you. Instead please ask her if she knows anything about the packages you sent. And where they went, and ask her that she should concern herself to see that they get to us. It causes us suffering and great sorrow, because she must certainly know exactly how poor we are, with clothes and all, that we got absolutely nothing from anywhere. If you could just see us once, how poor we must walk on this earth. Or why must we even still live when it must be this way? It is truly a sin to say, but finally still not astounding, that when one had to survive so much already in these beautiful young years, the joy of all life lost. But always and still now it has started and will not end. One blow after another lands on us and sadly we can't change it. We just have to hold on and wait. It is said after rain sunshine. So, if our Lord God helps maybe it will be so again with us. Now our loves, I wish you all everything good and will hope that our letter reaches you in good health. I will slowly close with many greetings, and kisses from us all. Katusch, Nikolausz, und Liesel Please answer.

Our loves, when you receive this letter, please write us immediately at this address your opinion so that it doesn't come to her and they will bring us the letter. Personally to
HAJMASI JAKOB dolnja Groblja broj. 2gg. Apatin. Jugoslavia

My dear uncle aunt John and Gretchen!

I also want to add a few lines. I'm still well and what we wish for you with all our hearts. A few days ago we received the first letter from you after such a long time. I can't describe how it was in our hearts. We laughed and cried with joy that we still have you in life, that we felt so lost and thought we no longer had anyone. That we also knew nothing even of uncle Adam. As long as we were working outside we had no connection with anyone. But with God's help and our trust of him we were finally able to hear from you all. Only still from Aunt Liesel we heard nothing more but what Uncle Adam wrote. We were also always waiting for a little letter from her. Because for us a letter is always an encouragement especially your letter consoles us again my loves.

My loves, I want to relay with great joy that after twenty months our dearest little brother has come to us, that we no longer believed possible. What a great joy that was for us but now our great concern to survive. But if it becomes possible for us again, we want to get to uncle Adam. Aunt Lotte wrote whoever has suffered so much can withstand a little more hardship and then finally be able to rest. We want to do that but sadly it's now more difficult. But he who trusts in God didn't build on sand. When men abandon us, God does not. Now the three of us are completely alone from all our relatives. The others are already over the wire. Has Aunt Rose not yet written to you? She is also gone.

My dearests, I want thank you very much for the money that you sent for us. for that we can't be thankful enough to you. For when it comes to life you can't be thankful enough. That in the time that we've been here we first know of the hunger our dear mother suffered. Also, little Nikolausz tells us, but we are not allowed to cry or he says not a word.

Dear Gretchen and John,

It pleases me to hear you are happy and content living together. The dear God should also be with you, so that it remains so forever, because now we know at best how beautiful it is to be happy and content; we so poorly blessed, our beautiful youth destroyed. Now I will close because Little Nick also wants to write a little. Once again my sweetests, I wish you everything good imaginable. I greet and kiss you all many thousand times.

Kathe Bloom A nice greeting from Heinrich Klosz and his mother and Gredelsgot Schulhause.

My dear Uncle and Aunt John and Gretchen,

Also I want to write my lines to you my loves. I am still well and am living, though I could tell you difficult things that I have survived, but this letter is so little. Yet, with God's help, where I already doubted, yet I was returned once again to my dear sisters, and hope with them that we will also go farther, and want to go with Brigitte exploring in the woods. With heartfelt greetings from Nikolausz Blum

Letter from Janoshalma ⁹²

January 28, 1948

My dear Uncle, Aunt, John aunt Marge. With great joy I received your anxiously awaited letter. Especially great was the joy when I saw your picture, finally, after such a long years. Though everything had been taken from us, we were able to save a picture of you as well as our dear mother, father, Uncle Adam, aunt and Brigitte. That was in sad hours all we had. They gave us relief. Now this little picture is the first in the morning and last in the evening, the same as with my dear mother. Though she is no longer with us, her lovely picture is always with me. It gives me special joy and relief, because I bear all hardships and sorrows. Now we can see how poor and lost we are, because Liesel and Nikolausz are far out on a farm, so that we don't see each other often. How happy they will be with your supportive letter, that you are so concerned about us. Yes, we will pray to dear God, that he will reward your goodwill with good luck. Dear uncle, aunt, and children you want to know our exact birthday, our fate, and whether we want to join you. For us, there could be no greater joy than that, if only you would be successful, or if that great water were not there. Then we could possibly come there. But we will leave that to the dear God. What he does is well done. Well Nikolausz was born March 8, 1936, Liesel September 5, 1929, and I November 8, 1923. October 1944 Russians and partisans came. Now I want to tell you briefly about our time in the camps. January 16, 1945 was our fateful day when we got into our neighboring village Sekitch, into camp, where we were still with our dear mother and Nick until October 1, 1945. Then the able-bodied were selected to stay there and work. Those not able to work, such as mothers and children, including our dear mother and Nick were sent to a ver... (presume she meant verdampte, meaning damned, which was considered swearing) Camp in Kruschevlje. There our dear mother, as so many others, died of starvation in March 1946. So now Nicklaus was alone, though other aunts were still there. After two months they commanded that such lone children had to report, and he too was dragged away. Liesel and I remained in Sekitch until March 1946. Then we were moved to the state-owned farm near Subotica. We were there already three months after Mother's death when we heard that we are motherless. I gave all I had to a woman to see if it were possible to bring Nikolausz to us. But he was no longer there, and nobody knew where they had taken him. By chance we heard that he was nearby and Petrvoselo, but by the time we inquired he was moved away again. We continued our search until we find out that he was in Slovenia, Ljubljana. We were put in a camp at Subotica January 14, 1947 for 14 days. Then we came to Sombor. We could not rest in our search for our dear brother. Finally we learned from his teachers that he was in Ljubljana and on May 20, 1947 we made a request for reunification. We had a good commander, and with the help of pharmacist Heinrich Klosz and on June 30, 1947 Nick came back to us. That was a great joy in the camp. We went away from the camp on September 11, 1947 and are at this place Janoshalma, Hungary to this day. So my dears, I gave you a short description of our trail of sorrows.

⁹² Katusch Blum, letter from Janoshalma, Hungary to Brückner family, January 29, 1948. English translation by Henry Wolf

You ask about my foot. I can work and walk. When I walk, it's barely noticeable. However, it is considerably weaker than the other foot. Otherwise, we are healthy, and we wish you the same, because that is the most important.

Now I must close, because it's late already and no one is at home.

Heartiest greetings and kisses to you all from Nikolausz, Liesel, and Katherine Blum.

One letter was lost. Good luck with your intentions!

We also received a letter from Uncle Adam on the same day, where he wrote the same about you.

Note from conversation with Nikolausz Blum, my Uncle Nick⁹³

Nickolausz Blum (the little brother in the letter from Sombor), is 80 years old now, and lives in Parma Heights, Ohio. In March of 1946, when he was nine, or newly ten, he was with his mother at her death in the camp at Kruschevlje. When he was reunited with his sisters more than a year after their mother's death, he would not tell them of what happened in Krushevlje if they cried.⁹⁴ I have been reluctant to question Uncle Nick about those days, for fear of awakening painful memories, but he knows of my interest in our family's stories and on January 3, 2013 during a spontaneous conversation we had, he volunteered several details. Shortly afterward, I combined what he told me with information I'd gotten from my father, into this note:⁹⁵

When Feketic was occupied by Russians and Yugoslavian partisans in October of 1944, Liesel (recently 15), Katusch (almost 21) and Nikolausz (8) were with their mother in their home. Their father (46) was already gone; drafted into the German army. My grandmother Katarina and the children were taken captive and brought to a holding "camp" in Sekitch (now known as Lovcenac). In Sekitch, the family was separated, and Nick and his mother were taken to Krushelyje, a camp for prisoners who were unable to work, that my father describes as an "annihilation" or "starvation" camp. At that camp my grandmother died of starvation, leaving Nikolausz alone. The authorities at Krushelyje placed him in a school in Ribnica Slovenia, where he went to fourth grade and was presumably being "re-educated" to disconnect himself from his past. At the same time Liesel and Katusch remained captives and were forced to work under inhumane conditions in the Sekich area and eventually in Sombor (very close to Hungary near the Danube) both in then-Yugoslavia/now-Serbia. While there, Katusch was able to learn of Nikolausz's whereabouts and was able to make arrangements to have him brought to Sombor. Ultimately the three siblings escaped Sombor, initially to Hungary. From there they and their relatives, the Gegners (Adam was my grandmother Blum's brother) were for a time in Austria, where Nikolausz attended fifth grade. Katusch married Johann Hellermann and they travelled with Nikolausz to Bavaria, where Helga was born. Liesel remained in Austria, where she worked in a hotel. The Brückners (Margaretha, nee Blum, was my grandmother Blum's sister) sponsored the family to come to the US. Liesel emigrated first by herself from Austria on the USS General S.D. Sturgis in March of 1952. The Hellermanns and Nikolausz came from Germany in June.

⁹³ Nick Blum (formerly, Nikolausz Blum) note from conversation with the author, January 3, 2013.

⁹⁴ "Letter from Sombor August 8, 1947." Leisel, Katusch, and Nikolausz Blum, to Brückner family. January 29, 1948. Sombor, Yugoslavia.

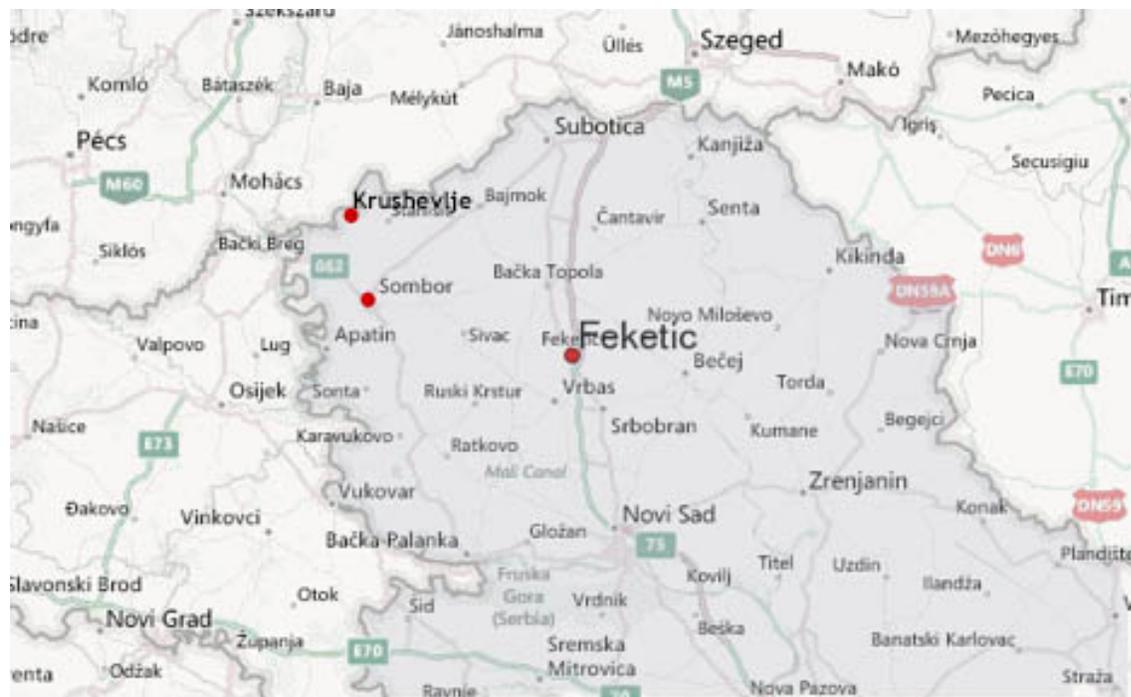
⁹⁵ Many of the details in this note are corroborated by details found in Katusch's "Letter from Janoshalma January 29, 1948." Katusch Blum to Brückner family. January 29, 1948. Janoshalma, Hungary.

Sombor. 8 VIII 1947

Unsere lieben Onkel Tante Kusiene u. Kosenk!

Nun wiederum, nach einer schönen Zeit wollen wir
 paar Zeilen an euch unsere lieben Tanten. Da wir
 nun endlich auch von euch den ersten Brief u. auch
 dass im Brief erwähnte Geld also 1000 Din. beide erhal-
 ten haben, dafür wir uns nun unsere lieben, recht
 herzlich bedanken. Ocht könnt's euch ja gar nicht denken
 was soet die Gross die Heule war bei uns als wir euch
 lieben Brief erstaus wir stürmen, nun den schönen
 Frost, welchen ihr dann für uns geschrieben, was für
 Kraft u. Macht zu unserm Wohte. ja immer schreit
 stören u. Sinnlossein dasein, was nun wir auf
 dieser Erde haben, doch wiederum gemessen. ja so ist
 es halt, oder geht es leider da wir nun niemandem
 wir u. bleib auf der grossen Welt mehr haben so
 ist uns doch in dem grossen Jähmet für die aller grösste
 Freud von irgendwem irgendwas zu hören. Ich glau-
 pten wir schon nicht mehr dass wir noch ja irgend
 etwas von euch hören u. doch ist es gewiss. So also
 schön wir doch dass auch für uns noch jemand lebt
 wenn wir nun schon so verlassen u. unglücklich in
 dieser schreckl. Zeit ohne Mutter zurück gelieben sind.
 so wollen wir unsern Herr Gott bitten u. beten dass
 er uns euch erhalten möge, den wenn man schon
 keine Mutter u. vielleicht auch schon keinen Vater
 mehr hat, dazu schon ungebild. spirituell stinkt
 nicht von allen andern Vindemilten u. bekennen,
 da scheint uns, man nahm ab die Sonn, sehr finstert
 oder gar nicht mehr, es drückt ja oft auf uns so sehr
 als wenn der ganze Himmel auf uns wär. Da doch
 müssen und wollen wir hoffen, dass auch für uns
 nochmal Mittel bereit werden, auf dieser grossen Erd.

3. Image of top portion of first page (of four pages) of letter from Sombor dated August 8, 1947, written by siblings Liesel, Katusch and Nikolausz Blum. Letter property of author.



4. Map of the Batschka Feketic is at the center of this map of the Batschka region, which is the northernmost area of present-day Serbia. Sekitch/Lovcenac is immediately north of Feketic, and Sombor is west-northwest of both. Krusevlje/Bácskörtés is directly north of Sombor. Belgrade lies south-southeast of Feketic, just off this map. Janoshalma, Hungary is near the top center of this map



5. Europe. The Batschka region is the northernmost part of Serbia, very near Hungary.

6. Photos

This photograph to the left, circa 1937, is the only photo that Elisabeth had of her family. The adults, seated, are Katarina Blum (nee Gegner) and Nick Blum. The children are Katarina (Katusch, approx. 14), Elisabeth (Liesel, approx. 8) and Nick (Nikolausz, approx. 2) Blum. Photos from the author's collection.



The photo above, circa 1951, is the first known picture of Elisabeth from after her captivity. The young man was her fiance in Ostermeithing, Austria before she emigrated to the US.



This suitcase made the journey across the Atlantic with Elisabeth (Liesel) Blum in 1952. Note the address painted on the suitcase is the home of the Brueckner family that the Blum children's 1947 letter was sent to, and was also Liesel's destination when she first migrated to the US. For me just touching the suitcase my mother carried awakens emotional feelings and reminds me of her stories. Suitcase from the author's collection.



This is what the house she traveled to, at 1539 Rosewood Avenue in Lakewood Ohio, looks like today.



Painting of "da'hame," the old windmill. unsigned, artist unknown, owned by Annemarie Wolf



Photos of the exteriors of the house where Liesel lived and the building where she went to school
Taken by the author in Feketic in 2016



Danube Swabian Crest

Form 1-41
 TREASURY DEPARTMENT
 United States Customs Service

Form approved
 Dept. Form No. 41-200-1

MANIFEST NO. 3

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
 Immigration and Naturalization Service
 (Rev. 1-4-40)

Class DP from Bremerhaven, 4th March, 1952
 (Port of departure)

SHIP "GENERAL S. D. STURGIS" arriving at port of New York, NY 15 MAR 1952

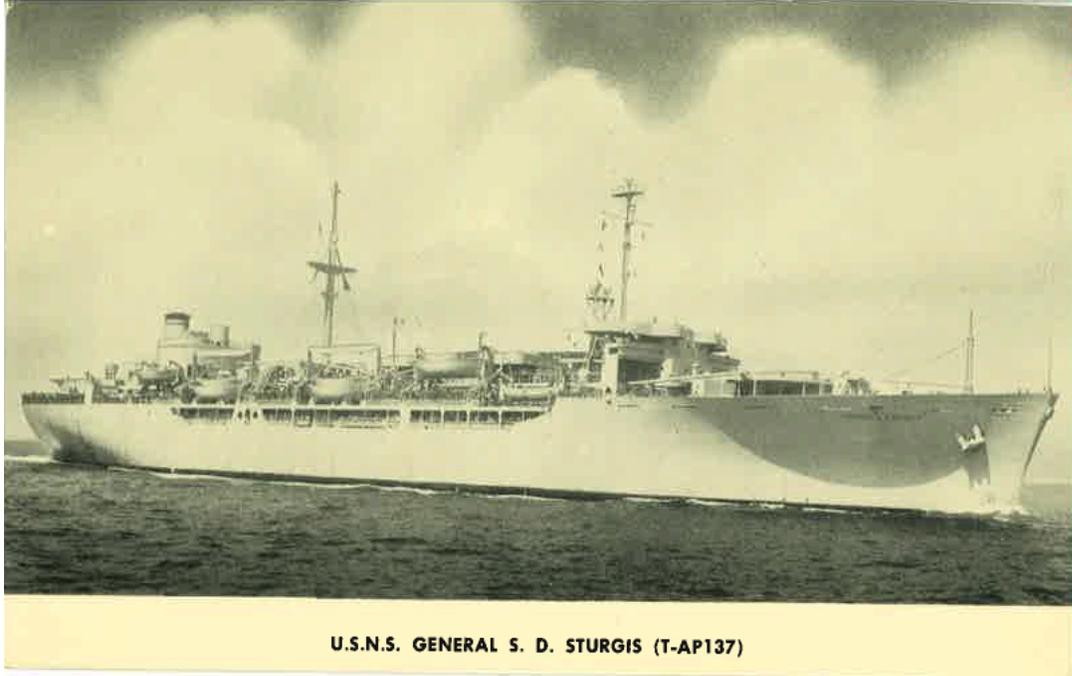
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
LINE	FAMILY NAME, GIVEN NAME RESIDENCE (if stated)	AGE Dated	SEX M-F	MAR- RIS OR SINGLE	TRAVEL DOC. NO. NATIONALITY	NUMBER AND DESCRIPTION OF PIECE OF BAGGAGE	HEAR- TAX COL- LECTED
✓	BAUGARTNER Michael 179 S Main St, Norwalk, Conn	29	Ma	Ma	I-1212448 Hungarian		No R+TA EXEMPT
✓	BAUGARTNER Rosalie 179 S Main St, Norwalk, Conn	29	F	Ma	I-1212449 Hungarian		No R+TA
✓	BAUGARTNER Michael 179 S Main St, Norwalk, Conn	18	Ma	S	I-1212450 Hungarian		No
✓	BAUGARTNER Josef 179 S Main St, Norwalk, Conn	14	Ma	S	I-1212451 Hungarian		No
✓	BAUGARTNER Johann 179 S Main St, Norwalk, Conn	3	Ma	S	I-1212452 Hungarian		No
✓	HANEY Margarete 20 Seymour St, Binghamton, NY	29	F	D	I-1333104 German	181 A8257644-Albany, NY, 9-10 st	No
✓	HANEY Peter 20 Seymour St, Binghamton, NY	10	Ma	S	I-1333105 German		No
✓	BARANOVICH Johann 209 W Girard Ave, Philadelphia 23, Pa	25	Ma	Ma	I-1375769 Hungarian		No New
✓	BARANOVICH Gisella 209 W Girard Ave, Philadelphia 23, Pa	22	F	Ma	I-1375790 Hungarian		No
✓	BICH Elisabeth 120 E 23 St, New York 10, NY	57	F	W	I-1160037 Stateless		No EWS
✓	BINDER Andreas 3715 Chatham Ave, Cleveland 13, Ohio	38	Ma	Ma	I-1375731 Rumanian		No AWEF
✓	BINDER Maria 3715 Chatham Ave, Cleveland 13, Ohio	30	F	Ma	I-1375732 Rumanian		No
✓	BINDER Andreas 3715 Chatham Ave, Cleveland 13, Ohio	14	Ma	S	I-1375733 Rumanian		No
✓	BIEK Gustav 145 E 32 St, New York 16, NY	30	Ma	Ma	I-1212095 German		No LWT
✓	BIEK Lisa 145 E 32 St, New York 16, NY	25	F	Ma	I-1212096 German		No
✓	BIEK Erich 145 E 32 St, New York 16, NY	5	Ma	S	I-1212097 German		No
✓	BLISTYAK Ladislav 440 Chestnut St, Brooklyn, NY	24	Ma	S	I-1375626 Czech		No TA
✓	BLUM Elisabeth 1539 Rosewood Ave, Lakewood 5, Ohio	22	F	S	I-1160125 Stateless		No TA
✓	BOCHINGER Basil Milwaukee, Wis	40	Ma	S	I-592248 German		No FEH
✓	BOHM Dorothea 425 La Grave SE Grand Rapids, Mich	31	F	S	I-1052881 Stateless		No New
✓	BOCS Magdalena 97-99 Ave B New York City, NY	77	F	W	I-1375792 Russian		No HOCIC
✓	BORSODY Heinrich Bridgeton, NJ	49	Ma	Ma	I-1375097 Yugoslav		No New
✓	BORSODY Karoline Bridgeton, NJ	42	F	Ma	I-1375098 Yugoslav		No
✓	BORSODY Walther Bridgeton, NJ	20	Ma	S	I-1375099 Yugoslav		No

1:20 AM

3

7. Ship Manifest USNS General S.D. Sturgis, arriving New York City on March 15, 1952. Elisabeth (Liesel) Blum is the eighteenth entry. From ancestry.com

8. More photos



Postcard of the USNS General S. D. Sturgis, The ship that Elisabeth (Liesel) Blum crossed the ocean on. Postcard property of the author.



Elisabeth's wedding photo, January 4, 1956. The little girl is Helga, daughter of sister Katusch. The bride's maid is Brigitte Gegner, with whom little Nikolausz wanted go explore the woods. The groom is Henry Wolf and the best man is his brother, Adam. Both men were also from Feketic, and schoolmates of Liesel's Photo property of the author.



Elisabeth (Liesel) with Henry on December 11, 2014. Photo by author.



Elisabeth (Liesel) Blum Wolf died on January 29, 2015. She and Henry were married 59 years. Photo by author.