

## Story of a Transylvanian Saxon from Biertan

The Transylvanian Saxons of Romania are nearly all but gone from the country, driven out by war, communism and finally the opportunity to leave Romania in 1990 for a new life in the old homeland of Germany. Their distinctive architecture is nearly all that remains of their unique cultural heritage. Here, the story of one ordinary but also very special Transylvanian Saxon is told, in her own words, capturing just some of the traumas faced by the Saxons following the arrival of Soviet communism in Romania in 1944. Sara Römischer was a Transylvanian Saxon from Biertan (German: Birthälm), born in 1919 and passed away in 2006. Here, she recounts what happened to her and many other Saxons following the arrival of Soviet troops in Romania, in 1944:



Sara Römischer

I remember the year 1945, because we Saxons were kidnapped from Siebenbürgen between the ages of 18-35 to do hard labour in Russia. It was the 16<sup>th</sup> January, beautiful, warm weather and still no snow. Then, we were torn away from our loves, children, parents and brothers and sisters. If you have not experienced this, it is difficult for you to understand. I tried to creep away somewhere and hid myself on our property in the Voistel, where we had a storage shelter to get some protection from the rainy weather. In it there was hay for the cattle, about fifty meters from the forest. I was not fearful of staying alone there overnight, because another greater fear was having to leave my children without knowing whether I would ever return. The children were still small at that time: seven, five and three years old.

You can imagine what kind of feelings a mother has at such a time, and yet there were so many other mothers just like me.

On the third day, in the morning at 4 o'clock my father-in-law came and told me that he would go in my place. I could not permit that; to kidnap the old man. So I left my hiding place and went to the home I would have to leave the same day. I quickly packed something to eat, and warm clothes, because it was winter. My husband was at that time still serving in the German armed forces, it was still war. The Russians were after us.

From Birthälm we all left on foot, marching as slaves; still lucky that it was a beautiful, warm day.

We could hear the ringing of the bells accompanying us for a long time. There was no possibility of escaping, with a Russian soldier always 50 metres away with a rifle ready to prevent it. We were kept in Mediasch for two days, until they had gathered together people from all the municipalities of Hermannstadt district. 32 railroad cars were there ready for the first transporting away of the flowering youth of our population – not all to return home again.

On 24<sup>th</sup> January 1945 we were loaded onto loud cattle rail wagons – containing lice - men and women in the same railroad cars. The journey lasted seven days, then the train stood still. They only drove us further at night – racing as fast as the locomotive could go.

Then, suddenly the train stopped. It was in the night of 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1945. We saw out of the window and ascertained that we were to be doubled up in the station and redistributed to the wagons. We were up to 30 persons in a railroad car. There was a soldier at every ten steps with a loaded rifle. They were there to ensure nobody ran away. There was however no possibility of that.

Konstantinowka - Kreiss Donbass (in German) - was the end of the line for us. It had been a large industrial city, but because of the war, there was a lot of debris and heaps of rubble. We went in single file one behind the

other and hoped soon to reach a bed, or at the least, to a building sheltered from the wind, because it was so cold and the wind was blowing, like in the Russian Steppes – indeed, that's where we were!

Unfortunately we came to a destroyed blockhouse, with no windows or doors, just heaps of debris. Inside, it was colder than outside. There was no talk of sleep or rest. We were stuffed into a bath. That did good after fourteen days of not being able to wash. Afterwards there was a medical examination, still in the middle of the night, and then came the morning so the night was now over. Out of excitement and hunger we could only stagger around. Not once could we talk. There was also the constant uncertainty about what will happen to us next. Then we heard a loud voice: "Dawai Pa cusat!" (Russian: "Time for food"). That was the call to eat; well, who understood that? We thought, what is going to happen now, until then 2-3 men came, who translated. It was cabbage soup, but without the leaf; it was pure saltwater; the cabbage was not enough for everyone, since we were about 1500 people. That was now our daily soup, year in, year out. But I was young and young blood is resistant.

We were from the Mediasch, Pretai, Reichesdorf, Hetzeldorf, Wurmloch, Tobsdorf, Birthälm and

Scharosch districts, all young people between the ages of 18-35 – the bloom of our Saxon land. One can hardly describe the first two years: Hunger, cold weather, bugs, lice in the hair, lice in the dresses. Many died of hunger - including Russians; they also had nothing to eat, exactly the same as us. There we trapped some dogs and also cats. I myself also ate cat meat. The hunger causes pain. That was for three years, where there was the same saltwater to eat daily. Many more of the men became ill, because a woman is able to look after herself more easily. I have seen how the men picked grass, in order to calm the hunger. It is the absolute truth. I also ate raw Hollyhock. One often thought, the stomach (hunger) must be stilled with something, because the small bit of bread they gave you was already eaten up by 4 o'clock in the morning and there was to be no more bread until the next morning, only cabbage soup.

Anyway, there was more money after three years. Things also got better for the Russian people. But many old people died from hunger and the cold. In the five years we slept on boards. Head and body lice were our constant guests. Many were so undernourished that they had careworn lines across their faces.

Before the journey home they gave us ten days to recover. What I have written is the truth. There is however much more still that could be to be told.

Sara Römischer



Fortified Church of Biertan



Former home of Sara Römischer, Biertan



Typical rural Transylvanian Saxon home (in Malancrav)

**More information:**

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biertan>

<http://www.sibiweb.de/geschi/7b-history.htm>