

Three Family Descriptions of The *Great Trek* from Ukraine to Hungary March - May, 1944

Background

My family is one hundred percent German Russian, we are not only German Russian by descent, but with the exception of our youngest sibling we were all born in Black Sea Ukraine. We were thus 5th- or 6th generation direct descendants of Germans who had emigrated to the Odessa area in Southwest Russia in the early 1800s and remained there until the German army “resettled” us to Poland in 1944..

Both of my parents were born to long-time, traditional farming families with many children. My father broke the mold of the agricultural life and became a teacher. In that culture most farm girls preferred to marry a good farmer, but my mother and her parents concluded that it was not so bad for her to marry a poor itinerant village teacher.

By June of 1930 the Communists had already begun to suppress religion in Southwest Ukraine. So Valentin Herzog and Elisabeth Steiert were married first in a civil ceremony in my mother’s birthplace of Freidorf and then in a dark-of-night secret religious ceremony in a Catholic church in Odessa, some forty miles away.

Schools in German villages had been taught in German, and my father began his teaching career in German schools, but by the late 1930s all were turned into schools where only Russian was the language of instruction. My father was able to teach in either language, so the switch came naturally to him even he decidedly did not welcome it. Soon, though, after the German army invaded Russia via Ukraine in 1941, schools in German villages reverted to being taught in German.

Because the village teacher was transferred nearly every two years from one German town to another, my parents lived in five different German villages between 1930 and 1943. Each supported a school, and in every village our family lived either close to school or in the school building itself. Between 1931 and 1938 they had four children

When the German army began to retreat through Ukraine in early 1944, the German occupiers simply removed hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans, with the ostensible aim of “resettling” them in rural areas of German-occupied western Poland. My family was part of this resettlement.

The longest part of this journey, which we came to call The Trek, was by horse-drawn carts and wagons and proceeded for seven weeks on mud paths, unpaved and (a few) paved roads, over flats and hills and mountains, and under mostly inclement spring weather conditions that included an occasional snow storm. The final part of the

journey took place via railroad (cattle) cars from southern Hungary (now northern Romania) to western Poland.

Clearly the most arduous part of this “Great Trek,” as it would later be called, was the slow seven-week slog. Our village started out on March 19, 1944, and we soon joined other villages’ “sub-treks” on the way. We first turned south, crossed the rather wide Dniester estuary by ferry from Ovidiopol on the East to Akkerman on the West, then headed somewhat north, then westward and across the Pruth River into south-eastern Romania, and to the outliers of the Carpathian Mountains, where we stopped temporarily for the birth of our youngest and final sibling, Michael, on April 24. After that came the arduous crossing of the Carpathians, with the wagon portion of the trek ending in Dejj (Hungary), now Dej (Romania)..

We finally arrived in Poland by mid-May. There all those families were dispersed to existing homes and farms in the countryside from which the Polish owners had been evicted by the occupying Germans.

For this article, the rest of our family’s journey can be summed up quickly: we later fled from Poland to Berlin, where we waited out the end of WW II in northern Berlin. Subsequently we lived in East Germany, but in 1947 we were able to move to West Germany, and in late 1953 the entire family emigrated to the United States.

Introducing the Trek Stories

Much later, three separate members of my family – father, mother, and eldest sibling Maria – wrote down their life stories, in which we find their personal descriptions of the trek. These appear immediately after this introduction/.

As one would expect, major facts largely agree in the three separate renditions, but there are sometimes subtle, sometimes stronger differences between them, especially in seemingly insignificant, but nevertheless important details. To no one’s surprise, different people’s memories of the same or similar events naturally tend to differ, especially when reconstructed later in life. Moreover, writing and reporting styles tend to be wildly different between different personalities. This makes for interesting and fascinating reading and comparisons, and it is why all three descriptions of the same timeframe and the same long-term event – in this case the Great Trek of 1944 -- are included below.

1. Valentin Herzog's Version of the Trek

(Excerpts are from Herzog, Valentin, *A Watcher at the Gate*, a memoir; translated, edited and privately published by Michael B. Herzog, Spokane, WA. 1981, pp. 56-63.)

The German army began to suffer serious setbacks in the winter of 1943, and things began to look even worse for their Russian campaign in the spring of 1944. A general withdrawal began, ending with the hasty retreat of the entire German army. And this led to the well-known exodus of all Germans in our part of Russia, at exactly the same rate of speed with which the German army was retreating westward. The Russian army, at the same time, was moving ever more rapidly, inundating whole areas like a great red wave; for many of our communities the sudden command to prepare for immediate departure from the only home we knew came totally unexpectedly—no one was prepared for the order to leave Strassenfeld [within only two days,] on March 19th, 1944. [The village, which also had the Russian name of Getmantzi, was about forty miles northwest of Odessa.]

The major difficulty our family faced was the lack of transportation. The question was where to find a horse and wagon. The German command had no time to worry about me or about others in my situation and left these matters to the local mayor's office. It so happened that the community of Strassenfeld owned two stud stallions, one of whom the mayor claimed for his own use and the other of which he gave to his brother, with the understanding that this individual would create two teams of horses out of his own five and this stallion, to be used in the withdrawal. As the town's teacher, supervisor of the communal oil mill as well as of the local defense group, I was to have one of these teams placed at my disposal for the withdrawal, along with the mayor's nephew, Michael, who was to serve as our driver. But this still left us without a wagon, a problem the mayor solved by appropriating a wagon belonging to a local Russian. This became our wagon, onto which we loaded the bare necessities we could fit on it. These did not amount to much, since the wagon had to

accommodate the six of us plus our “driver,” who ended up spending more of his time sleeping than driving.

The weather had been inclement for a week when we began our communal trip into the unknown; the ground was soft and muddy and, before we had gone 100 meters, the first of the Strassenfeld wagons was already stuck in the mud. Of course anyone who tried to help also got stuck, in part due to poor planning and to the inability to envision the facts of life as they were. Quite a few of our people assumed they would resettle in Poland and pick up where they had left off. So they packed everything they could in the way of tools and farming implements but had to toss them all out, sooner rather than later, so that they could continue on their way.

We had two pigs, one of which—along with most of our chickens—we slaughtered before we left. Our sow had recently had eight piglets, which I gave, along with the remaining pig and a few chickens as recompense to the Russian whose wagon we had “inherited.” I later wished that we had also given him the two cows which we pulled along behind our wagon for the first twenty-five kilometers, where we were forced to simply leave them standing by the wayside, as it had become clear that we could not feed them on our journey.

We arrived in Selz [this is a factual error – it should be Kandel, near Selz – as can be seen in a 1944 trek diary kept by Valentin] the evening of the first day and our wagon, along with others, was brought into the yard of a large farm for the night. For one night we were lords and masters of everything the people who had left this, their home, the night before, and we had a real supper consisting of their provisions and the best wine from their cellar. The next morning we were roused roughly by the commander of the German troops who harangued us into leaving before breakfast.

The wagon train of which we were a part consisted of a row of vehicles that stretched out to a length of 35 kilometers, wagon after wagon filled with families trying to survive the journey that would turn out to last nine full weeks. Of course all of the events that make up human experience occurred also in this moving community of people with a common history and destiny: children were born, old people died, and life continued without regard for the upheaval that had so suddenly overtaken all of us. At one point, a little girl was run over and killed by a passing car. She was wrapped in a cloth and was buried at once in a shallow grave on the assumption that she was dead—although no one was absolutely certain of that fact. Then the wagon train moved on.

Our three-day trip to the border [of the former Bessarabia] took place under very bad weather conditions, and the nights posed new problems, as we were not able to simply spend them outdoors because the little Russian villages along the way were hardly able to accommodate us. On top of that, living conditions of the Russians were quite different from those we Germans were accustomed to, failing to meet the standards of cleanliness and space that we had assumed people generally subscribed to.

On the third evening we finally arrived at the bank of the Dniester River [estuary], already thickly populated with hundreds of wagons and their inhabitants when we joined them, all wanting to cross over. We camped there that night, waiting for our turn to be ferried across the next day. The other side of the river [11 miles wide estuary at this point] represented a certain degree of safety, celebrated by whoops of joy emanating from many of our traveling companions. The day after, Russian troops reached the Russian [East] side of the river as well, capturing thousands of our fellow travelers who had not

yet managed to cross over. Thousands of others who tried to swim the heavily-flooded river were mowed down in a hail of bullets by the Red Army and the locals sympathetic to the Russian cause. It was a bloodbath of historic proportions, as we learned from eye witnesses who had escaped the massacre.

During the night of April 22, the wagons temporarily stopped. Maria, our oldest child at thirteen, and I had been walking alongside the wagon since there was not room on it for all of us. When we stopped, Maria, dead-tired, sat down and fell asleep. When the wagons began to move again, I trotted alongside as before, listening to the moans of my wife, who had gone into labor a few hours earlier. After ten or fifteen minutes, I suddenly realized that Maria was no longer at my side in the dark. Saying nothing to anyone, I ran back along the row of moving wagons, trying to make out the figure of a sleeping child. There she was, at the spot where we had stopped, sound asleep. I picked her up and ran as fast as I could, carrying her back to our wagon, where I managed to find a small space to cram her into for the rest of the night. It was only then that my panting alerted my wife to the fact that something had been amiss.

During our first month on the trek, I repeatedly asked myself what we would do when my wife's time to deliver came. That question was answered fortuitously, because when we arrived in Bogdanesti, Romania, on the 23rd of April, we discovered that the local schoolhouse had been converted into a field hospital, where the presence of a doctor made the birth of our last child, Michael, on the 24th, much easier than her previous birthings had been. Despite my efforts to persuade those in charge to let us rest in Bogdanesti for a few days after the delivery, we were forced to move on the next day; in fact, we had to move at a greater rate of speed than before in order to catch

up with our part of the trek, lest we lose our right to provisions and the chance to be surrounded by the familiar faces of the people we knew. And so we did catch up with our people

2. Elisabeth Herzog's Version of the Trek

(Excerpted from Herzog, Elisabeth, *Shields of Fire*, a memoir; translated, edited and published by Michael B. Herzog, Spokane, WA. 1991, pp. 56-61.).

On the 16th of March, just after we had slaughtered a pig, a man came riding in with the news that in three days we would be leaving—we had to get ready whatever we could get ready. We were to prepare a three-day supply of food and provisions for ourselves and for our horses. We would have to leave behind everything we owned, including my family heirloom sewing machine; our oldest son, Willi, along with a friend, pulled all of the buttons off the registers of my husband's harmonium [a reed pump organ], which he had ransomed for 400 rubles when we first married. They destroyed the innards of the sewing machine also, to prevent anyone else from using it

I fried all of the meat that we had gotten from the pig—the sausages, of course were smoked—and put it in a big container, packed in the fat that we had gained from cooking the pig meat. We had 500 liter casks of wine and I took some of that wine and cooked it with sugar to make a sweet drink that we could take along as extra nourishment on the trek. We left our houses in the same state in which we were to find the houses of many others on our journey: the dishes on the table—just as they were left from the last meal—the bread lying out, the doors open to the world, the animals left behind in the stable wondering why no one was coming to feed them or to milk them or to collect their eggs.

We ourselves started out with our cow but had to leave her behind on the road; we milked her and left the bucket of milk standing next to her so that she and her calf could survive for a while or until someone else might come and take care of them. She bellowed after us, as if she knew that we were leaving, as if she did not want to be left behind like this. We left 40 chickens in the shed, sitting on their eggs—and of course we have no idea what became of them—whether someone moved in after us and took care of

them or whether they simply perished. Of course the fact that I was eight months pregnant with Michael did not make our departure any easier.

The Dniester River represented safety for us because once we had crossed it we thought that the Russians could no longer pursue us. The river was nine kilometers wide and was crossed by ferry. As many wagons as could fit—perhaps six to eight at a time—were transported across to the town of Ovidiopol [actually, from Ovidiopol to Akkerman on the west side].

The crossing took several hours. When we crossed on March 25th, a tremendous storm came up and we thought it would push the wagons off the ferry. Eventually it made the ferry unusable, and we barely made it before that happened. Those who could not cross in time and who now were without the protection of the German army were attacked by the Russian people with whatever they could find: axes, hoes, clubs—anything they could use as a weapon. It was terrible.

People asked me how I stayed so calm, considering that I was pregnant and knowing that I would have to bear this child somewhere in the unknown wide world, but I asked them instead: “What would you like me to do, climb the walls and scream? I’m sure that I will find what I need out there.” Of course I was not the only pregnant woman on the trek, and I took comfort from the fact that the Blessed Virgin had also made a trip into the unknown while she was carrying her child.

It was clear to me that we were leaving Russia forever—that we would never return—and so I made use of the trip to tell my children stories about the past and talk to them about leaving our home and about the unknown future into which we were riding. I did not have a sense of loss at leaving; the only thing I knew was that each day we went on we were still alive--whether we would be the next day I did not know—so all we could do was to live as best we could.

We covered perhaps twenty kilometers a day and spent most nights outside on our wagons, but occasionally we would stay in villages. Every few days we would have food distributed to us by the people in charge of the trek. The wagons were arranged by village of origin; the representatives of each village would count up the number of people they had and place their orders; then, when the food was delivered, the people would pick it up at a distribution point; there was margarine, flour, potatoes, occasionally even beef, milk, eggs, etc. Although we had taken fodder for the horses, that did

not last very long and so we sometime had to barter what little extra clothing we had for horse feed.

On the 23rd of April we arrived in a little Romanian town called Bogdanesti. There was a school there and my baby was due. I spent the night on one of the school children's tables which had been converted into beds. On April 24th, about noon, our fifth child, Michael, was born. It was a very difficult birth, perhaps because of the traveling we had been doing. I said at the time that this child did not have a very hopeful life ahead of him, but the doctor joked that we needed more babies who could grow up into soldiers to fight the war. The baby did not cry when he was born until the doctor slapped him a couple of times on the behind and then he started to scream--there are those who say that he never stopped after that. Our only daughter, Maria, was very disappointed, because she wanted to have a sister. I suppose many people thought that Michael was named after my grandfather or after my husband's father, but I actually named him for the archangel on whose protection we called throughout this most frightening of journeys.

Michael's infancy was very difficult because we had nearly none of the things that new-born babies need. We had a few diapers with us and the doctor gave us a few more. We would rinse them out when we got to a stream. But we did not have the chance to make fires so that we could boil them. On May 2, there was a very large snowfall, perhaps five inches. That day we got to a large fruit orchard and we also had our first chance to bathe the baby. All the children from around the camp came when they heard him screaming. He screamed so loudly and so impressively that they claimed they would always be able to identify this baby by his scream—it was a scream they said they would never forget.

In the middle of May in Hungary, we stopped outside a soccer stadium in a huge open area, waiting for the train to take us on the next leg of our journey. A man brought five blankets full of walnuts and handed them out. We were guarded by Hungarian soldiers with drawn bayonets and could not move out of line. These soldiers trusted no one, but the women who stood behind walls at the sides of the roads would throw food into our wagons when the soldiers were not looking: fruit, bread and baked goods. They said that today it is us, but tomorrow it might be them in our predicament. Before we got on the trains, we were deloused in a huge building with the women and children on one side and the men and the boys older than ten on the other side. They took our wagons and horses, telling us that we would

travel by train from now on. Of course we never saw our wagons or horses again. They took my baby and bathed him and deloused him and one woman, maybe she thought it was funny, told me that they had confused babies and that the baby I was getting back was not my baby but some other baby. I told her not to worry—that she could not upset me with this—that any of the children around could identify this baby as ours—and our children all said: “This is our Michel.”

3. Maria McKeirnan’s (nee Herzog) Version of the Trek

(Excerpted from Herzog, Elisabeth *Springs of Delivery. My Life*, a memoir; transcribed, edited and published by Alex Herzog, Boulder, CO, 2004, ch. 4, pp. 1-12.)

There we were. We kids didn’t really know what was happening. I don’t even remember whether they said why we would have to be evacuated—they might have implied it. But our folks knew that the Russians were coming closer.

The message arrived on the 17th of Mach, 1944, and we were given only two days until the deadline for leaving. We butchered a pig on the 17th. Mama cut it up and boiled it in fat. Then she made oodles of noodles. Every chair and table in the house was full of noodle dough hung up to dry. Mama cut the dry noodles into strips, and then she put them on sheets and dried them some more. She had the oven going to dry the noodles on the stove, and when they were dry she put them into pillow cases. She also milked the cow and quickly made some butter, rendered it and put it into crocks. The amazing thing is that she did not ask for help but did all that work by herself.

Of course there was no thought of school any more. All the kids stayed at home and parents wouldn’t leave them out of their sight. People were scared to death. To compound our worries and troubles even more, Mama was eight months pregnant with our brother Michael, and here she had to do all that hard work to prepare for such an awful undertaking. No one knew how far we would get or what might happen, or if we would be lucky enough to get to a safe place. We were all pretty much in a daze.

The roads in Russia at that time of year were at their worst condition of the year. The spring thaw had just begun, and mud was up to people’s knees and up to the axles of the wagons, which had problems just to get going. If I remember correctly, it was not raining early that day of March 19, 1944, but it was overcast. In fact, later that day, it even snowed just a

bit. It was not pleasant. We really had no good or effective way of putting a cover on the wagons. Nobody had any tarp, for example.

The German military authorities had put Papa in charge of organizing the whole town and therefore to make sure that everybody gathered at the appropriate time and place. I clearly remember us lining up and heading out of town. Everyone was scared. They were just numb. Let's put it this way—you had no feelings left. It was one miserable situation. Everybody was crying. Since there wasn't room for me and Papa in the wagon, I had to walk, and I ended up walking from that beginning to the very end of the wagon train trek in Hungary.

All the while we sensed the Russian front not that far behind us. We could even hear some shooting. There were airplanes overhead, too, but they didn't bother us. It turns out that a lot of people did not make it across the Dniester to what is now Moldova because the Russian army caught up with them before they could be ferried across. Our ferry was under bombardment during and after our crossing. We were one of the last villages to make it. I can't remember how it felt to make it. I think there was no feeling at all. As a child, even though you are afraid, you still take some things in with at least a measure of curiosity. After all, I had never been on a ferry, and I had never seen a river that big, and I observed all that, but I didn't feel much. Maybe in hindsight you think about, but at the time I felt only constant, overpowering fear. Those who were left behind might even have thought to themselves: "Oh, we didn't want to go in the first place." But that kind of thinking didn't help them because they were most likely sent to Siberia as soon as the Russians caught up with them.

I remember very well turning thirteen on April 3. Of course we didn't make a big fuss about birthdays in Russia. It was mostly the name days we celebrated and, because there are so many Marian feasts, I chose the 8th of December for my name day. I do know that my thirteenth birthday was acknowledged and the people we stayed with invited us to eat with them or brought us something to eat.

Normally, during the day, as Papa and I were walking, we would collect whatever little pieces of wood we would find—maybe twigs or other small pieces—and then we would try to find some rocks to put together to make a fire in them and put the pot on. And Mama would get some water and put in some of the pork she had prepared in Strassenfeld, plus some of her noodles, and that was our meal practically every single night. I was so sick of that smoke. The soup always smelled like smoke—not like barbecue but really smoky, and it was way too fat, but we ate it because there was nothing else to eat.

Twice I had to have my shoes resoled. When we came to a town where there was a shoemaker, Papa took my shoes and went looking for him. One night we got into camp very late and had a bad night and then had to leave early the next morning, so everyone was dead tired. As we were walking together, Papa said he had to organize some column elsewhere and for some reason the wagon train stopped, which was very unusual because it never stopped during the day. I sat down on the road and must have fallen asleep because when I woke up everything was moving again but I didn't recognize anyone or anything. I don't know how far the wagon train had gone—it seemed like an eternity—and I was deathly afraid. To this day I can feel that abandonment. But as soon as I realized that I was lost, I started running with the flow of the wagons and probably yelling too. People noticed me but they had their own worries. I don't know how long I ran but I was totally out of breath when, finally, Papa came running toward me. He too had been frightened out of his head. I had thought for sure that I was lost and gone because people got lost all the time. And the wagon train just kept moving.

The day before April 24th we came to a huge campground. In those days children weren't told much of anything. We hadn't even been told about Mama being pregnant. Neither were we told about the baby arriving possibly any day. All I know is that Papa suddenly came and said that he had to leave with Mama and that some people were supposed to look out for the rest of us. So, Papa left with Mama. He was gone for what seemed like an eternity. They had left during daylight and he came back by himself after dark. For all I remember he might have come back the next day. But more importantly, he came to tell us that we had a new little brother. He was given the name Michael. Actually, my mother didn't particularly like the name, one reason being that she knew people might call him "Michel." So I don't know why she named him Michael after all. Luckily for us, there was a school that had been converted into a hospital and there was a doctor to help with the delivery. We found out later that without him, Mike might never have made it. The doctor had to get him out with forceps. Maybe Mama wouldn't have made it either—who knows? It was another of our good fortunes.

Luckily my mother was able to nurse Michael, but under the primitive conditions of the wagon train the baby did not have a bath for six days after he was born. He was so dirty that he had creases in his hands and they were all pussy from holding his little fists together. We had no water, but there had been a snow storm, so we melted some snow and my mother bathed Michael. He cried day and night and we did not know why—for all we knew

he was very ill—or maybe he didn't get changed enough or not enough food. In any case, we were very worried about his survival and after the bath my mother said, "There, now he can at least die clean." But it seemed that after his first big bath Michael perked up and soon he got better. Maybe he decided that he'd like to stick around, anyhow.

When the wagon train was disbanded, we continued our trip on a train, in boxcars. Periodically the train would stop and people would relieve themselves on the side of the railway. During one such stop my brother Willi, who was extremely curious, just had to look around, got too far afield, and didn't seem to hear the whistle when the train started going. He finally heard it and ran his little legs off. The people in our car were all besides themselves. Mama and Papa were screaming and yelling to him but he finally made it and people stood one behind the other in the car holding on to Papa as he pulled him into the train. Willi got a good scolding for that but we were very happy that he had made it back.

On the trek, our parents became very strict with us and would not leave us out of their sight. And I can tell you that Willi always went with Papa after that when they went potty. Of course, as a child you don't notice all the trauma—you just go with the flow—but the adults must have gone out of their minds—the worry, the lack of food and shelter, the sicknesses, and even the fear of losing their kids.