

1940: Resettlement - 1942: Settlement - 1945: Escape The Johann Graf family from Cataloi in Dobruja

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Fig.1: cover picture of the family book: „My journey to a new homeland“ / source [1]

Foreword

In summer 2016, my father (*30.03.1933 Cataloi †17.03.2024 Unterheinriet) wanted to tell me his memories of his life. However, as I had very little time at that time, I asked him to write down everything he remembered. After he had put everything down on paper, I wrote it up on the PC and sorted the individual events into chronological order. New questions kept popping up as I was writing. Father was able to answer almost all my questions. After many long conversations, I had gathered so much information that I created a family book with the title: "My journey to a new homeland". I gifted this book to my father for his 85th birthday in March 2018. I would now like to let my father have his say from these notes on the subject of "Resettlement- Settlement- Escape". He talked about the period from summer 1940 to February 1945 as follows:

Resettlement

In the summer of 1940, authorised representatives of the "German Reich" came to our village of Cataloi and campaigned for resettlement to Germany - also known as the ""Heim ins Reich"" campaign. They told us that the German Reich would organise and prepare everything for the resettlement of the Cataloi villagers to Germany and distributed a letter entitled "Aufruf der Volksdeutschen Mittelstelle". My father, Johann Graf, did not want to join this resettlement. However, my uncle Martin Kaißner and other villagers kept persuading him. In the end, my father agreed to the resettlement. In November 1940, six months after I started school, the time had actually come. Almost all the families in Cataloi had decided to relocate to Germany. Albert Stiller writes in the Heimatbuch der Dobrudschadeutschen that "in 1940, 335 people from Cataloi were registered by the resettlement commission and resettled to Germany. 3 people from Cataloi stayed behind." (Source [2])

We packed our household goods, our clothes and something to eat into wooden crates. The Romanian farmer who took over our farm drove us to the railway station in Babadag on a horse-

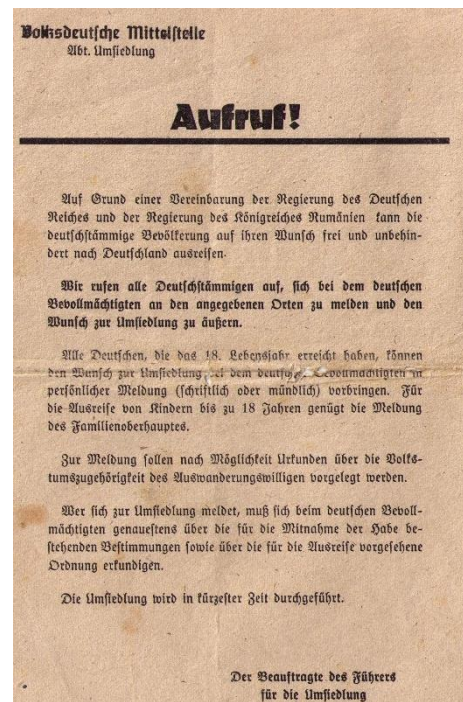


Fig.2: Aufruf Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle / source [1]



Fig. 3: EWZ-identification tag of Friedrich Graf / source [1]

drawn cart with all our belongings. There we were met by employees of the resettlement commission and given EWZ (= Einwanderungszentrale = Immigration Centre) identification tags, which everyone had to wear visibly. Our suitcases and crates were loaded onto a train. Then we travelled by train from Babadag to the Danube port in Cernovada. As I had never travelled by train before, everything was new and very interesting for me, so I spent the whole train journey looking out of the window and marvelling at the passing

landscape. I felt so queasy that I even vomited later on.

When we arrived at the harbour in Cernovoda, we (all the families of Cataloi) were immediately "loaded" onto a ship with our belongings. On the ship, I was immediately taken to the military hospital because I had vomited during the train journey. The hospital was run by German doctors and nurses. Our ship set sail and was supposed to take us along the Danube to Semlin near Belgrade. Unfortunately, we had an accident on the way in which our ship hit a rock and was unable to continue. Then we all had to change to another ship and continue our journey to Semlin. All the resettlers from the Dobruja village of Cobadin were on the new ship, which is why we met my great-uncle Jakob Graf's family there.

When we arrived in Semlin, we were surprised with richly laid tables. Ferdinand Schlaps from Cobadin reports on this reception: *"We had a very nice boat trip to Semlin near Belgrade, three days and two and a half nights. Semlin was a large transit camp for thousands of people, all in tent barracks on an island. We went through a three-day cold cure there. There were Cobadins, Tariverders, Cataluiers and Caramuraters in the transit camp at the same time. The food was as good as if it were a wedding every day. All the food was donated by the Banat Swabians."* (Source [3])

After a short time, we travelled on by train to Graz in Austria. There was a short stop here, during which those in charge decided which Dobruja village had to go to which camp in Germany. The people of Cataloi and other resettlers from Dobruja travelled on from Graz by train to Pfaffendorf in Upper Franconia.

There was a large "reception camp" in Pfaffendorf, where the resettlers crowded into the accommodation. The resettler families lived close together and the individual family areas were only separated by cloths or blankets. Space and privacy were in short supply. As the camp became more and more crowded and the crowding almost unbearable, my father Johann Graf and my uncle Martin Kaißner approached the authorities and asked if there was another camp they could go to with their families that might not be as crowded as Pfaffendorf. The authorities told them about a camp in Rentweinsdorf that housed resettlers who were resisting naturalisation in Germany. My father Johann Graf and uncle Martin Kaißner said that they would like to go to this camp with their families, perhaps they could even persuade the people there to change their minds. The authorities agreed to the proposal.

In March 1941, some of the Cataloi families made their way to Rentweinsdorf in Lower Franconia. The camp was located in the Rentweinsdorf castle of the Barons of Rotenhan. Baroness von Rotenhan, whom we called "Mrs Baroness", and her family lived in Reintweinsdorf Castle. The room layout was as follows: The corridors faced the inner courtyard and the rooms all faced the garden at the back. Baroness von Rotenhan lived on the ground floor in the right wing and on the first floor in the right

wing and the centre section. The entire left wing was also occupied by family members of the Barons of Rotenhan. The Cataloi families and young lads lived on the 2nd floor of the right wing and the centre section. On the ground floor of the centre section was the large staircase, the kitchen, our dining room, the toilets and the rooms for the older Cataloi girls.



Castle Rentweinsdorf of the Barons of Rotenhan.
Fig. 4: left: inner courtyard / source [4] / Fig. 5: right: castle garden / source [5]

On the 2nd floor, the 1st room was used by the camp manager as an office. Then came the nurses' and infirmary room. The kindergarten was in the 3rd room, the Krause and Hinz families lived in the 4th room, my uncle Martin Kaißner's family lived in the 5th room (corner room), then the Gottlieb Schmidt family, my aunt Christine Ockert's family and my family (Johann Graf family) lived in the centre section on the left, the Jakob Kaißner family lived in the next room, and the Seitz, Ludwig, Christof families and a Romanian family who also took part in the resettlement operation lived in the large middle room.

Behind the left wing of the castle was the castle garden, the farm and the brewery of the Barons of Rotenhan.

In the castle, several nurses, "Sister Betty" the kindergarten teacher, a cook and a camp manager were responsible for us resettlers. The camp manager, the nurses and the kindergarten teacher were only in the camp during the day and stayed overnight in the village.



Fig. 6: Johann Graf (1900-1945)
Fig. 7 Anna Graf widowed Nitschke née Kaißner (1892-1956) / source [1]

At the beginning of our stay in Rentweinsdorf, all the resettlers were photographed and given a very thorough medical examination. The examination results were neatly recorded on index cards. In addition, each family had to write a short curriculum vitae and list their ancestors, as far as they could trace them. These records are all archived under the term "EWZ documents" in the Federal Archives in Berlin. We also received various injections and vaccinations every week during this time and were not allowed to leave the camp for several weeks. We were then naturalised and received our naturalisation certificate on 29 September 1941.

At the beginning of our stay in Rentweinsdorf, all the children, regardless of age, went to kindergarten with Sister Betty. Whenever the weather permitted, she took us for walks through the village or across the nearby fields and meadows. Sister Betty had also campaigned with the Baroness for us children to be allowed to play in the garden behind the castle. The Baroness initially refused to

allow this, but Sister Betty persisted until the Baroness agreed. Sister Betty always looked after us children very well and I was very fond of her.



Fig. 8: Camp Rentweinsdorf 1941 – Families of Cataloi

Kinder liegend v.l.n.r.: Christian Krause (37*), Reinhold Kaißner (28)

Kinder sitzend v.l.n.r.: Alwine Graf (20), Martha Schmidt (92), Christine Kaißner (30), ?Lutz (88 Ciucorova), Sohn des rumänischen Ehepaares, ?Lutz (88 Ciucorova), ?, ?, Tobias Glass (17), ?, Gottlieb Kaißner (31), Edmund Kaißner (31), Maria und Bertha Krause (37)

Kinder kniend v.l.n.r.: Sohn des rumänischen Ehepaares, Sohn von Gustav Lutz (88 Ciucurova), Christine Graf (20), Ida Kaißner (30), Rosa Schmidt (92), Katharina Kaißner (28), Friedrich Graf (20)

1. Reihe Erwachsene v.l.n.r.: Frau von Gustav Hornung oder Karoline Christov (4), Katharina Suckert (103) oder Susanne Seitz (102), Johann Graf (19 und 20), Anna Graf (29 und 20), Eva Schmidt (92), 5 Schwestern des Lagers - Namen unbekannt, Schwester Betty (war für Kindergarten zuständig), Köchin des Lagers - Namen unbekannt, Augustine Hinz (21), Gottlieb Hinz (21), Johann Krause (37), Rosa Krause (37), Luise Ehrmann (geb. Fechner und Mutter von Katharina Glass (18)), Rosalie Lutz (88 Ciucorova)

2. Reihe Erwachsene v.l.n.r.: Gustav Hornung, Heinrich Suckert (103), rumänisches Ehepaar mit Kind - Namen unbekannt, Christine Ockert (29 und 67), Katharina Glass (18), Ludwig Glass (18), Lagerleiter - Name unbekannt, Johannes Ockert (67 und 71), Erika Ockert (71), Rosine Ockert (71), Jakob Kaißner (29 und 30), Anna Kaißner (30), Lydia Kaißner (31), Martin Kaißner (29 und 31), Christine Kaißner (31), Gustav Lutz (88 Ciucorova)

3. Reihe Erwachsene v.l.n.r.: Christine Suckert (103), Karoline Kaißner (30), Eva Kaißner (30 und 28), Magdalene Schmidt (92), ?, ?Hinz, ?, ?, ?, Erna Kaißner (30), Emma Glass (15), Pauline Graf (20), Katharina Kaißner (30), Katharina Schmidt (92), Hilde Lutz (88 Ciucorova), Justine Hinz (22), ?

4. Reihe Erwachsene v.l.n.r.: Karl Hinz (22), ?, Hermann Kaißner (30), Andreas Suckert (103), Emanuel Ockert (67), Gottlieb Suckert (103), Friedrich Kaißner (30), Emil Suckert (103), Philipp? Seitz (102), Karl Suckert (103), Gottlieb Schmidt (92), ?, Josef Schmidt (92), ?

* Numbers in brackets refer to the Cataloi family numbers in the Heimatbuch der Dobruschadeutschen (pages 95-98) / The Gustav Lutz family is listed in the Heimatbuch der Dobruschadeutschen in Ciucurova (page 83) under the number 88.

However, all of Gustav Lutz's children were born in Cataloi

source [1]

We were in the Rentweinsdorf camp from March 1941 to July 1942, during which time I drank lemonade for the first time in my life. This was both a special and funny experience. The lemonade had so much carbon dioxide that it went up my nose and made my eyes water. The lemonade tasted delicious. I was now almost 8 years old and had to attend German school during our stay at the camp. As long as we were not allowed to leave the camp in the castle, the teacher came to the castle and taught us children in the dining room. Later, we went straight to school in Rentweinsdorf. The

transition from the Romanian school to a German school wasn't easy for me, but at least I understood the teacher, who spoke German like me. In the few months I attended school in Lower Franconia, I learnt to read and write.

My father Johann Graf worked in a factory during our time in the camp, like all the other men of Cataloi. Unfortunately, I don't remember what the factory was called or what was produced there. I only remember that the men travelled to Bamberg by train every working day.

Shortly after we arrived at the camp in Rentweinsdorf, my grandfather Friedrich Kaißner was in very poor health. He had to go to hospital in Ebern, where he died on 1 April 1941 from cardiac insufficiency and myocarditis at the age of almost 78. He was buried in the cemetery in Rentweinsdorf.

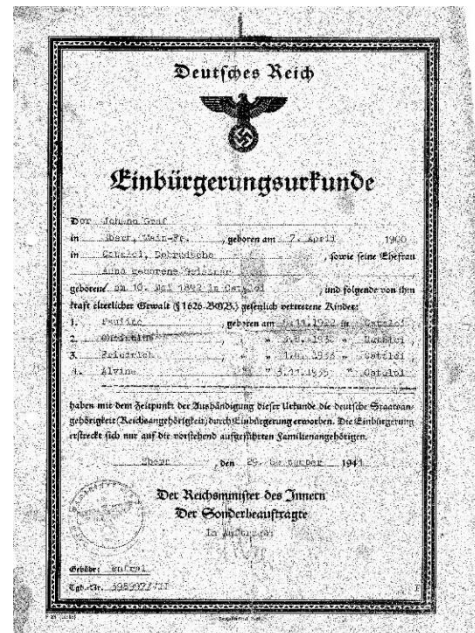


Fig. 9: naturalisation certificate family Johann Graf / source [1]



Fig.10: The Kaißner and Graf families in the garden of Rentweinsdorf Castle on the occasion of Friedrich Kaißner's funeral in April 1941

1st row (children): Eduard + Gottlieb Kaißner (sons of Martin Kaißner), Reinhold "Heim" (son of Eva Kaißner), Erika Ockert (daughter of Johannes Ockert), Katharina "Heim" (daughter of Eva Kaißner), Christine Graf (daughter of Johann Graf), Christine Kaißner (daughter of Martin Kaißner), Christine Kaißner (daughter of Jakob Kaißner), Alwine Graf (daughter of Johann Graf), Dangwarth Nitschke (son of Johannes Nitschke), Friedrich Graf (son of Johann Graf), Martha Schmidt (mar. Berndtke and sister of Mathilde Nitschke)

2nd row: Anna Kaißner (wife of Jakob Kaißner), Luise Kaißner (wife of Friedrich Kaißner), Christine Ockert (née Kaißner), Anna Graf (wife of Johann Graf), Lydia Kaißner (wife of Martin Kaißner), Sofia Wirsch née Rust, Mathilde Nitschke (wife of Johannes Nitschke), Rosa Ockert (wife of Johannes Ockert)

3rd row: Jakob Kaißner, Friedrich Kaißner, Johann Graf, Martin Kaißner, Gustav Wirsch (son of Pauline Wirsch née Graf), Johannes Nitschke, Johannes Ockert (son of Christine Ockert)

4th row: Katharina Kaißner, Eva Kaißner, Erna Kaißner, Pauline Graf (daughter of Anna Graf), Karoline Kaißner (apart from Pauline Graf, all other daughters of Jakob Kaißner are in this row)

source [1]



Fig. 11: map Reichsgau Wartheland 1943 / source [6]

Settlement

At the beginning of July 1942, we were sent to Poland with other families for resettlement. Once again, we loaded our belongings onto a train and travelled to Poland. When we arrived in Poland, we had to spend 3 weeks in a camp in Litzmannstadt (now Lodz). My family was then settled in the village of Gallwiese (now Galevice), in the district of Welun an der Warthe, with other families from Cataloi, all of whom, like my family, belonged to the German Baptist congregation in Cataloi. I remember the following Cataloi families: Rauser, 2x Issler, Manuel Ockert, Christine Ockert, Johannes Ockert, Wilhelm Ockert, Kühn, Christoph Schmidt, Friedrich Schmidt, Wilhelm Schmidt. The Andreas and Karl Ockert families lived in a neighbouring village about 1 km away

from Gallwiese.

Unfortunately, there were no Baptist meetings during our time in Gallwiese. I had the impression that a National Socialist attitude and a "Heil Hitler salute" were now more important.

Other Cataloi families of Lutheran denomination were settled in Senkfeld (today: Skryzynno) and Nimmersatt (today: Niermierzyn), about 25-30 kilometres away from Gallwiese. My uncle Martin Kaißner and his family lived in Nimmersatt.

The German government had already had many new wooden houses built before the resettlers arrived. These houses now only had to be occupied by us resettlers. The families of Christoph Schmidt and my aunt Christine Ockert were allocated such plots with new wooden houses in the centre of Gallwiese. My family was given a plot with 5 farms on the edge of Gallwiese. There was a finished concrete base plate, but unfortunately no new wooden house "waiting" for our family.

The Polish owners still lived on all 5 farms that were assigned to my family. So that our family could move in, the Polish owners were expelled from their own farms by the police and the Hitler Youth. These expulsions caused the Polish families a lot of suffering and created a lot of hatred between the Polish and German population. The owners of the other 4 farms were allowed to stay and had to continue farming their farms for my family.

My half-brother Johannes Nitschke had already settled with his family in Klein-Döbel in Poland for some time and had therefore already settled in well on his farm. As the farm assigned to us in Gallwiese still had to be prepared for our family, my younger sister Alwine and I stayed with my half-brother Johannes Nitschke's family for about 8-10 days. During this time, my parents and my older sisters Pauline and Christine tried to set up the farm for our family.

Again, we had to start all over again. We also had to learn how to get on with the Polish villagers and communicate with them. Our farms comprised around 30 hectares of land. About 10 hectares of this was good land, the remaining 20 hectares consisted of meadows and sandy soil. We had 3 horses, 2 oxen, 5 cows, chickens, pigeons, rabbits and pigs. There was a lot of life on the farm. We lived for 2 ½ years with and from the goods and chattels entrusted to us.

During our time in Gallwiese, I also attended the German school again. My school friends were Reinhold Ockert (son of Immanuel Ockert from Cataloi), Karl Ockert (son of Karl Ockert from Cataloi) and Adolf Hinz. Karl Ockert and Adolf Hinz lived in the

neighbouring village of Gallwiese, about 1 km away, and always passed our farm on their way to school. Reinhold lived right in the centre of the village of Gallwiese and was also my secondary school teacher. We were taught by a teacher who lived right next door to the school. Reinhold and I were under special observation by our teacher. When I did something wrong - I probably teased a girl, but I can't remember exactly - the teacher gave me such a hard slap that all her fingers were on my cheek afterwards. On another occasion, when Reinhold and I had done something wrong again, we were given detention after class. We waited and waited, but the teacher didn't come; she had forgotten about us. After we had waited long enough and wondered whether the teacher would come after all, we decided to just leave the classroom and go home.

ANSETZUNGS AUSWEIS

Herd-Nr. *Do I-331* Umsiedlg.-Nr. *38/13/89*

Graf Johann
7.11.1900 Kataloi
Planet *Boyp.*

Nach Prüfung
des Rückk.-Ausw.

Angehörige des Herdes (lt. Aufnahme)

| Nr. | Name | Vorname | Fam | Geb.-Jahr |
|-----|-------------|------------------|-----------|-------------|
| 2 | <i>Graf</i> | <i>Anna</i> | <i>F.</i> | <i>1892</i> |
| 3 | <i>"</i> | <i>Pauline</i> | <i>F.</i> | <i>1922</i> |
| 4 | <i>"</i> | <i>Christine</i> | <i>"</i> | <i>1930</i> |
| 5 | <i>"</i> | <i>Friedrich</i> | <i>J.</i> | <i>1933</i> |
| 6 | <i>"</i> | <i>Marceline</i> | <i>G.</i> | <i>1935</i> |
| 7 | | | | |
| 8 | | | | |
| 9 | | | | |
| 10 | | | | |
| 11 | | | | |

Umsiedler!

Bewahre diesen Ausweis sorgfältig auf, denn nur mit diesem kann eine Ansetzung reibungslos erfolgen. Auch nach der Ansetzung ist der Ausweis aufzubewahren.

Fig. 12: Johann Graf family settlement certificate for settlement in Poland / source [1]

As our farm was outside the village, I didn't have many playmates. But I didn't have much time to play anyway, as we children often had to help out on the farm. In summer and autumn, I had to help with the harvest. Once the fields had been harvested, the cows were driven out onto the stubble field. I then had to look after the cows there during the day. When I did have time to play, I played with the Polish neighbour's children Edec and his younger brother Leo. While playing with the two boys, I picked up a few Polish words so that I could communicate with them better and better.

During my time in Gallwiese, I also took part in meetings and events organised by the Jungvolk. The Gallwiese group was led by Gustav Issler Jr. We boys, aged between 10 and 14, were called Pimpfe. Gustav Issler organised cross-country games for us, he trained us in throwing, running, long jump and marching. I enjoyed the cross-country games the most. Meetings and competitions were organised at regular intervals for the Jungvolk and the Hitler Youth for the entire Welun district. Gustav Issler only ever took the

best of his group to these competitions. I was once allowed to take part in a meeting in the next larger town of Wieruschau (today: Wieruszow). All the boys in the Jungvolk had uniforms, except me. As my father was critical of National Socialism, I was allowed to take part in the Jungvolk events, but he didn't buy me a uniform.

Because of his critical attitude towards National Socialism, my father was sometimes under observation. He also strictly refused to pay any bribes or "bribe" people in any other way. As a result, he was not so well regarded in the village and often had difficulties obtaining ration coupons from the authorities, which he urgently needed for a new plough, for example.

During our time in Gallwiese, the farms of the German settlers were repeatedly raided. A lot was stolen and much was damaged. As these raids increased, the German men joined forces from the summer of 1944 and went on "partisan hunts" at night.



Fig.13: Gallwiese (Galevice) in March 2024 with a view of the area on which the five farms of the Johann Graf family stood from 1942-1945 / source [7]

Escape

On 16 January 1945, my father and many other men from our village were drafted into the Volkssturm. Shortly before this, my father had wisely re-shod the horses and checked the cart for damage. He also instructed my mother to load the horse-drawn carriage for an imminent escape and told her which of the two horses she should choose as draught animals for the escape. My mother loaded the horse-drawn cart with concentrated feed for our three horses and other necessary things for the upcoming escape. She also visited my sister-in-law Mathilde Nitschke in Klein-Döbel to ask if she would like to join us. Mathilde, however, wanted to stay with her parents Gottlieb Schmidt and Eva, née Brendel, and set off directly from Klein-Döbel towards the west.

On 17 January 1945, our teacher sent us home with the words: "The Russians are just outside Gallwiese! Go home! Everyone must pack up and flee today!" As my mother had already prepared and loaded the horse and cart for the escape, all we had to do was harness the horses and drive to the village centre in Gallwiese as a meeting point. With heavy hearts, we had to leave our cows, pigs, chickens and rabbits behind on the farm.

More and more families gradually arrived at the assembly point with their horse-drawn carts and waited with bag and baggage to set off westwards so as not to fall into the hands of the Russians. Tanta Lydia Kaißner, née Sackmann, even travelled from Nimmersatt to Gallwiese because she wanted to be with my aunt Christine Ockert's family during the escape. At lunchtime it was announced: "There's no need to flee, the Volkssturm has beaten back the Russians." My mum talked to Aunt Christine. They decided that my family would stay with Aunt Christine and not return to our farm. Aunt Christine's farm was located directly in Gallwiese near the village well. However, my sister Pauline was sent back to our farm to slaughter a few chickens. The chickens were then scalded, plucked, gutted and cooked in Aunt Christine's yard so that we could take them with us as food for the upcoming escape. On 18 January 1945, my mother woke us up at 2 a.m. with the words: "We have to flee!" All the families living in Gallwiese formed a trek and slowly set off from Gallwiese in a westerly direction that night. Our Polish farm labourer accompanied us and drove the horse-drawn cart. After about 1 ½ hours, the trek came to a halt on a hill. The Issler family's horses had to pull two wagons hitched together. As the load was too heavy for the horses on the

mountain, the horses started to slip and almost went off the track. There was great excitement, but in the end there was no major damage. The next time, the incident with two wagons hitched to each other did not go so smoothly. As our wagon train was crossing a bridge over the raging Prosna River, the family driving in front of our wagon came off the side of the bridge with the rear wagon and was already halfway down the abyss. It wouldn't have taken much for the rear wagon to fall into the river. It was only because all the men pitched in and helped together that a major accident was prevented.

Magdalene Schmidt, Frieda Ockert and my mother formed a small group within the trek, as they had to set off on their escape without their husbands. Christoph Schmidt and Friedrich Ockert, like my father, were drafted into the Volkssturm shortly before the escape. Magdalene Schmidt was also accompanied by her Polish farm labourer. Frieda Ockert was travelling without any male company.

On the first evening, we stopped at the farm of a Polish family so that our mothers could cook something warm for their families. However, the women immediately had a bad feeling when they met the Polish farmer and wanted to leave straight away. However, the landlord wouldn't let us drive on and demanded one of our three horses. My mum then gave him our oldest horse. Now we had to harness our young horse, which had only been tied to the back of the wagon since then, to the front as a draught horse. My mum had great doubts as to whether the young horse was even suitable as a draught horse. However, the horse could be harnessed without any problems and travelled well with the other horse. We set off in the middle of the night without stopping again.

The next day we arrived at a large manor in Silesia, where we planned to spend the night. There we briefly met my two aunts Lydia Kaißner and Christine Ockert and my sister-in-law Mathilde Nitschke with her children. Unfortunately, we only saw each other in passing. As we drove into the manor, my two aunts and my sister-in-law were already driving out of the manor in their cars. The manor was already overcrowded with other refugees that evening, so the only option for our families was to spend the night in the cowshed. When we wanted to move on the next morning, our horses were harnessed but our Polish farmhand had disappeared. He left without saying goodbye, but was honest enough not to take any of our packed belongings and supplies with him. Magdalene Schmidt's Polish farm labourer also disappeared after a few days.

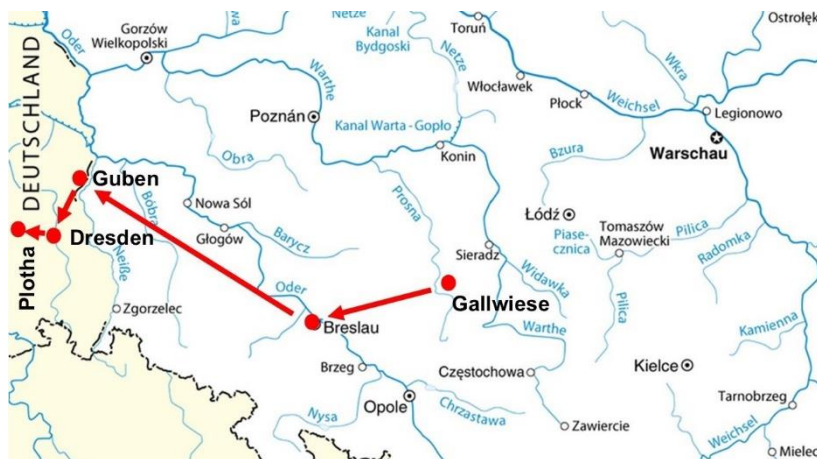
After the disappearance of our farmhand, my mother and my eldest sister Pauline had to drive the horse and cart. The days were very cold and so my mother and Pauline took turns driving. If my mum steered the cart, Pauline walked, if Pauline steered, my mum walked to keep her feet warm. I sat on the wagon with my two sisters, Alwine and Christine, wrapped up warm. As we were in a large trek with other resettlers, we made very slow progress. The whole trek came to a standstill again and again because, for example, something was broken on a wagon and had to be repaired. In addition, the wagons constantly had to dodge the German army, which was in retreat. During one such "evasive manoeuvre", the Kühn family's rear wagon overturned. The 4-week-old baby Helga was lying there. Once again, everyone pitched in, turned the car round and checked on the baby, who was thankfully unharmed. Everyone was glad that nothing bad had happened in the accident. When the trek came to a halt again, we were told: "Be sure to check the horses' shoes and make sure that they are shod 'sharply' ('sharply' = shod with nails so that the horses have a good grip on the frozen ground), as we are now entering a wooded area and there may be a partisan attack." Our horses were shod well enough and were therefore able to pull our wagon without any problems. Once in the forest, the trek covered the distance through the forest at a trot.

We were all glad that there was no partisan attack on this occasion and that we did not have to experience such an attack during our entire escape.

Travelling in the trek was very slow and tough. One day the trek came to a halt behind our group of three. Our mothers didn't realise this straight away and were separated from the big trek. But that wasn't so bad, as the paths were criss-crossed by other refugees with large tracks so that you always knew which way to go. If it was unclear, you could always ask for directions, as there were a lot of people on the roads at the time.

Then we came to the Silesian mountains. However, our wagons were not equipped for the mountains. But there was help from men who were assigned by the labour service at this point to help the horse-drawn wagons drive downhill. The wagons had no wheel brakes, so the horses had to hold the entire load of the wagons with their harnesses. This was difficult because the roads were icy and had not been cleared of snow. The men from the labour service therefore clamped wooden sticks between the spokes to brake. Sometimes the horses slid down the hill on their arses with the whole weight of the wagon and the sticks between the spokes. It was only thanks to the intervention of the men and God's help that we all arrived at the foot of the Silesian Mountains with the horses unharmed.

We reached Wroclaw in January. There we spent the night in an abandoned house. The occupants had probably fled in a hurry as they had left a lot of things behind in the house. The pantry was well stocked with food, the cupboards were full of clothes and there were so many toys in the children's rooms that I had never seen before. The next day we had to cross the Oder bridge in Wroclaw. We were in the middle of the bridge with the horse-drawn carriage when the German Wehrmacht fired cannons from the other bank in the direction we had just come from. The horses shied and my mother had her hands full trying to calm them down. Somehow she managed to get us all safely to the other bank.



From Wroclaw onwards, there were men from the labour service at every major crossroads who stopped all the carts and refugees and asked where they were coming from. They directed the carts and told the refugees who had to go in which direction.

After a long journey, we arrived in Guben at the beginning of February and had to rest for about eight

days. Our horses were in desperate need of this rest and were re-shod during this time. In Guben we also met some men of Cataloi who had either returned from the Volkssturm or had left the troops. Our group was housed with many other refugees in a large and already overcrowded hall. We were glad when we were finally able to move on. In retrospect, I think that the authorities probably needed a few days to work out how to distribute all the refugees to the individual towns and villages. We received an "order" from the authorities that we had to go to Plothta in the district of Weißenfels. Each family was also assigned a man to drive the carts with immediate effect. My mother was assigned Mr Leisner from Tariverde. However, she wasn't entirely happy with him, so after the first day she decided to do without a driver. Gustav Issler senior

was assigned to Magdalene Schmidt. Frieda Ockert did not need a driver as she had met her father-in-law Wilhelm Ockert again in Guben.

During these days, many men who had been drafted into the Volkssturm left the troops. Wilhelm Schmidt and my father were among them. They did not immediately head west, but first went to Gallwiese to see if their families were still there or if they had managed to escape in time. In 1954, my mother received a letter from Gustav Issler Jr. telling her that Mrs Streich, the innkeeper in Gallwiese, had witnessed Wilhelm Schmidt and my father being killed. She reported that a kind of revolution was taking place in Poland at the time and that many returning Germans were killed by Poles who had also returned. On 26 February 1945, she had to watch Wilhelm Schmidt and my father being beaten and abused until they died. Mrs Streich then helped to bury them in Gallwiese.

When we were finally able to leave Guben, we didn't join the big refugee trek, but travelled on with the Schmidt and Ockert families so that we could move a little faster. Our journey continued in the direction of Dresden. We arrived in Dresden on 12 February 1945, where we spent the night on the straw-covered floor of a school. The next morning we moved on. When we were a few kilometres away from Dresden, the ground shook under our feet. We were all glad that we had already left Dresden in the morning and thus had to experience the bombing and the major attack on Dresden from a reasonably "safe" distance.

On 18 February 1945, we finally arrived in Plotha, in the district of Weißenfels an der Saale, with our horse and cart. Our escape had finally come to an end.

On our way from Cataloi (Dobruja) to our arrival in Plotha (Saxony-Anhalt), we travelled about 3700 km. However, Plotha was not my last station. In 1954, my journey took me via Bavaria to Baden-Württemberg, where I found a "new and beautiful homeland" in Unterheinriet in the district of Heilbronn from March 1955. There I met my wife Marta, née Bäuerle, and started a family with her.

Closing words

In memory of my father, I would like to end this report with the words with which he concluded his memoirs in the summer of 2016: *"When I look back on my life today, I realise that my wife Marta and I had to endure many ups and downs together and also each on our own. My faith in God the Almighty has guided and continues to guide me throughout my life and has accompanied me on all my journeys. God accompanied my family during the resettlement from Cataloi and the settlement in Poland, during the flight from Poland to Germany, during the new beginning in Saxony-Anhalt and the new start in West Germany.*

I am happy and grateful for God's guidance and support in my life and can only say: Glory, praise and thanks are to be shown to the Lord our God." (Source [1])

Sources

- [1] Private property Silke Neureuther
- [2] Heimatbuch der Dobrudscha-Deutschen; Publisher: Landsmannschaft der Dobrudscha- und Bulgariendeutschen e.V.; Typsetting: Heilbronner Stimme, Druckerei und Verlagsanstalt GmbH, Heilbronn; page 95.
- [3] Statement in minutes by Ferdinand Schlaps from Cobadin, Plasa Traian, Judet Constanța in Dobruja; original, dated 27 March 1956, 4 pages - <http://doku.zentrum-gegen-vertreibung.de/archiv/rumaenien/kapitel-4-1-1-0-8.htm>

- [4] https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/47/Schlo%C3%9F_Rentweinsdorf_%28Gesamtansicht%29.jpg?uselang=de
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- [8] [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosna#/media/Datei:FI%C3%BCsse_in_Polen_\(Karte\).png](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosna#/media/Datei:FI%C3%BCsse_in_Polen_(Karte).png)