

High Water in the Steppe

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About the Document: the *Bessarabischer Heimatkalender* is usually set up so that historical documents are featured at the beginning of an issue. Poems, songs, and short stories are usually features toward the end of the issue. The High Water/Flooding article below is featured toward the end of this 1984 issue. Therefore, I am suggesting that this may well be an historical-fiction. Flooding did take place on the Steppe where heavy rains caused rivers and streams that were running past villages located near-by to ruin and destroy buildings and property. This document seems to put together various events into one overall story.

Note: Information within [brackets] are comments by the translator.

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[Translation Begins]

High Water in the Steppe

Alfred Thilemann

Already early in the morning, it was hot and muggy. The sun stood clear in the sky and burned mercilessly on the dehydrated steppe, whose paths had been turned by the harvest wagons into a fine, floury dust, which lay thickly on the grasses. The leaves hung tiredly on the branches, still and motionless. In the streams and small steppe rivers, the water had dried up. In the mud, large, deep cracks appeared, through which the moisture had escaped. The steppe was thirsty, and still no clouds appeared that might promise rain.

Old Grandpa Herberg was uneasy. From time to time he looked up at the sky and was firmly convinced that today, on 27 August, 1927, it would rain. He felt it in his old body, for he knew his beloved steppe like no one else. He drew near when two policemen (*Gendarmen*) came to the farmyard and informed his son-in-law that he had to provide forced labor transportation (*Fronfuhre*) today. It would be a light duty, they assured the farmer. Two Romanian officers had to be taken to the Romanian village of Häräghisch, eighteen kilometers [11.2 miles] away. This news caught farmer Eduard Braun completely unprepared. He had already assigned his people to the day's work, and he himself had things to do that could not be neglected that day.

At the same time, however, he realized that this forced labor was indeed an easy one. And so he immediately had his team hitched up to take the officers to Häräghisch.

As a coachman, he assigned his son Alfred, who had just turned twelve. Alfred was a healthy, strong boy who was already quite good with horses. The farmer harnessed his brown mare and the large gelding Waska. He knew his horses and knew that they were well-behaved and calm animals. His wife Maria was not at all happy that Alfred was supposed to drive, because she believed that the boy was too young for such a trip since he did not know the route yet. It was only after her husband indicated that two officers would be riding in the wagon that she was reassured. Nevertheless, she did not have a good feeling about it, which she would soon find to be true. She prepared a snack for Alfred, as he would not be back until around three o'clock in the afternoon. Farmer Braun estimated that, at a leisurely pace, it would take two hours for the eighteen kilometers [11.2 miles] each way. Another hour was planned for the lunch break. The two policemen also said that the driver could drive back immediately. But things were about to turn out very differently!

When Alfred wanted to drive off to pick up the officers from their hotel in the small town, Grandpa came up to the wagon, handed his grandson a raincoat, and said, "Here, take it with you just in case." Alfred looked at his grandfather in surprise and asked, "Grandpa, since when does it rain out of a clear sky?" "Do not be so cheeky, you rascal! Look at the sky over there! Just half an hour ago, the sky was cloudless, and now you can see the first little cloud in the west. And remember, the rain comes from the west! Drive safely, my boy!" Full of pride, the father and the worried mother watched their eldest son as he drove out of the yard.

The municipality of Häräghisch was located northwest, near the Pruth River. To get there, one had to pass through the so-called Häräghisch Forest. Little Alfred had heard a lot about this forest, but had never been there. In this forest there were to be wolves. The local forester, Stanciu, claimed to have seen a pack of thirteen wolves just last winter. But Alfred was not thinking about that now. He was happy when he heard that another Romanian wagon would also take people to Häräghisch. So it happened that both wagons set off around nine o'clock [that morning]. The other wagon driver was a young man from the small town. He had hitched up a pair of lively little horses that cheerfully trotted along. This way, both teams made good progress.

Behind the Baimaklier Forest, which Alfred knew very well, there were still a few kilometers of open steppe, after which the eerie forest began. Even the entrance was terrifying. The path became so narrow that only one wagon could pass through at a time. On both sides of the path stood dense thickets four to five meters [13 to 16.4 feet] high, whose branches stretched over the path in places. A soothing shade greeted the travelers. Alfred wondered what he would do if another traveler came from the opposite direction. But after just a few hundred meters, the path widened again. Among the thickets stood mighty old oak and beech trees of a height and size Alfred had never seen before.

Alfred was thrilled by the shady forest. He could not get enough of looking at the tall trees. His horses trotted leisurely behind the wagon of the Romanian, for he was the older one and knew the way, so he let him go ahead. After half an hour of driving, they reached a wide, broad road,

onto which they turned left. Only the telephone line reminded them that there must be a settlement somewhere nearby. They had been driving for over an hour when the road suddenly took a steep descent. Up until then, it had followed a kind of plateau without any inclines. Alfred had not really noticed these conditions at all. He had been so preoccupied with the forest, which kept impressing him over and over again. Only a few hours later, he would very much regret not having paid better attention to the road. The slope of the road grew steeper and steeper. The horses struggled to keep the wagon under control. Alfred guided his wagon carefully and held the reins tightly. So, he drove down the steep hill at a walking pace, which seemed endless. The Romanian, on the other hand, was completely different. He had a brake shoe hanging under his wagon, which he now placed against the rear wheel and drove down the hill at a lively pace. He had long since unharnessed his horses and given them fodder by the time Alfred arrived at the office of the mayor.

The officers got out and said that he should wait, they would be finished very soon and would then drive back with him to Baimaklia. This had not been mentioned at home. His parents and even the police had said that he could go home again after the horses had been fed and taken care of. But when the officers ordered him to stay, he did not dare to leave without them, especially as they said they would return very soon. The horses had soon eaten their feed, and Alfred had also eaten his bread. But there was still no sign of the officers. With surprise, he had to hear from the Romanian driver that it could be five, or even six o'clock in the afternoon before the gentlemen would return. No, he was not aware of that, otherwise he would have made completely different arrangements. For a long time now, he had fed his [body into the wagon] seat, and still the officers had not returned.

Alfred was very startled when suddenly a loud clap of thunder was heard. Full of fear, he looked up at the sky and had to realize that deep, dark clouds were forming from the west, over the Pruth, approaching very quickly. Another flash of lightning, a loud thunderclap, and the first raindrops were already falling. Quickly, he took his raincoat and the padding from the seat of the officers and brought them into the lobby of the *Primaria*, the town hall.

One lightning bolt chased another, and the thunder did not stop. It rained so heavily that he could barely see his horses. The parched earth greedily absorbed the precious liquid. But after just a few minutes, water was standing centimeters [inches] high on the road. For a while, it still found a way to drain through the thick dust. Here and there, it piled up against the small dams formed by the piled-up straw and dried weeds. But only for seconds could these dams hold back the water that kept pouring ever more strongly from the sky. After ten more minutes, all that could be seen was a surface of water. The village ditch, which had been empty and dry just half an hour ago, had turned into a rushing stream, in which the water flowed with great speed toward the Pruth Valley. Suddenly, the sky cleared, and only in the distance could one hear the thunder, and then the rain stopped as quickly as it had begun. The wagon drivers took note of this fact with great joy.

When the officers and surveyors arrived around five o'clock, only a few drops were falling from the ash-covered leaves of the acacia trees under which the wagons with the horses were standing. The two teamsters quickly harnessed their horses. Alfred brought the dry padding to the [wagon] seat and, on the almost empty bag and with his dusty coat, he made himself a place to sit. The

horses sensed that they were going home and trotted off briskly. But very soon it became clear that the ground was softened and the wheels were cutting deep into the earth. More and more often they had to go at a walk, and so they progressed only slowly.

After about twenty-five minutes of driving, they reached the steep slope that led from the wide Pruth Valley into the forest. The road moved upward in winding paths. The roughly thirty-year-old Romanian jumped off the wagon, braced himself on the side, and urged his little horses on. Like mountain goats, the small horses climbed up the hill. With their little hooves, they dug into the softened soil, and soon they had disappeared around the first bend. Alfred's horses tried to keep up with them, but after just a few meters Waska, the heavy gelding, lost his footing in the muddy, softened ground and fell to his knees. The wagon began to slide down the steep slope. Alfred jumped off the wagon, grabbed the restless horse by the reins, and tried to get the heavy gelding back on its feet. The animal gratefully accepted the small help, and after slipping a few more times, managed to stand up. The brave brown mare held the wagon on the slope with trembling feet.

After Alfred had calmed the horses a little, he took them by the reins and very slowly, searching for a foothold with each step, they reached the first bend. The officers sat unaffected on the wagon, afraid of getting their polished boots dirty. Alfred tried in vain to take the individual slopes with momentum, as the experienced Romanian had done, but his horses were so anxious and uncertain that they would only move forward when he guided them by the harness. Nevertheless, the little coachman could not prevent his horses from falling countless times until he finally reached the top. Horses and coachman were smeared from head to foot with the slippery clay. With his hands, he brushed the worst of the dirt off his clothes and his bare feet. Only now, when he had taken his seat in the wagon again to continue his journey, did he realize with horror that he was alone with his wagon. There was no sign anywhere of the wagon of the Romanian. Bravely, he drove into the dark forest. Here, coming up from the plain, the rainwater could not drain away so quickly; it had softened the soil deeper, and the hooves of the horses found more grip.

During all the excitement and fuss over the fall of the horses, Alfred had not noticed that deep black clouds were once again gathering from the west. It was only when the first thunderclap crashed, with a force he had never heard before—after all, in his young life he had never experienced a thunderstorm in such a large forest—that he looked back in shock, and what he saw made him turn pale. The clouds, becoming one with the earth, stood behind him like a great black wall. He hardly had time to put on the coat his grandfather had given him when he left, when the dark, black wall reached his wagon. The rain poured down onto the travelers in buckets, mixed with hailstones the size of hazelnuts.

The officers held the padding of their seat over their heads and cursed the terrible storm. Little Alfred also pulled his raincoat over his bare head to shield himself from the painful blows of the large hailstones. Soaked through from head to foot, he knelt trembling with fear at the front [seat] of the wagon. The horses, with their tails tucked in, continued to pull the wagon at a slow pace. Again, a bright flash of lightning struck very close to the wagon. The thunder following was so tremendous that Alfred burst into tears from fear. He folded his childish hands and prayed fervently to God. Like a blow with a club, the ugly insults of the officers struck him, who

were cursing this God who was supposed to help him. Did these evil people not see and feel the power of God, who could destroy them with every lightning strike? The prayer of the child seemed stronger. God's benevolent hand guided the team safely through this terrible thunderstorm. Yes, even more! The rain let up, and Alfred could see two to three hundred meters [600-1,000 feet] again. But how different the forest looked after the big storm! There lay a proud, mighty oak split, struck by lightning, in the wet forest floor. The rain-soaked branches of the trees and shrubs bowed in gratitude all the way to the ground.

Alfred was relieved to see that the rain had completely stopped. But at the same time, his young heart stopped in fright when he saw houses in front of him. For heaven's sake, where was he? On the way there, he had not seen any houses on this road. Now a whole village lay before him!

There was no doubt, he had gotten lost. This was not his hometown Baimaklia, but the house of forester Stanciu and a few forest worker cottages.

Alfred stopped in front of the forestry office. The two completely soaked officers jumped joyfully from their seats, probably assuming that they had now reached their destination. Great was the disappointment of everyone when they had to hear that little Alfred had lost his way. The forester invited the gentlemen into his house, and over a glass of schnapps and a cup of coffee, he asked them to stay the night so they could dry their uniforms, as he saw himself unable to provide them with dry clothes. Alfred got feed for his horses and a piece of bread and a cup of warm milk for himself. The forester also explained to him that he should have turned onto the narrow, dark forest path three kilometers [1.9 miles] earlier. But due to the heavy rain, he had missed this turn-off. So that Alfred would not have to ride the three kilometers back, he was advised to take the steep shortcut, where he would reach the correct road again after the Baimaklier Forest.

As the sun appeared shortly before sunset, the officers still wanted to drive to the hotel in Baimaklia. Alfred was also glad to get the wet clothes off his body as soon as possible. Although he had wrung them out, they were not completely dry. Fortunately, it was pleasantly warm after the thunderstorm. As the sun went down, the travelers left the house of the forester. The forester had given Alfred and the officers specific directions. With good driving, they could comfortably cover the remaining kilometers in an hour.

But after about two kilometers [1.2 miles] they heard a rushing sound. Only a hundred meters [328 feet] ahead of them they saw a small depression. On the other side, one could see the road continuing. Suddenly, the horses stopped in front of water about thirty meters [98.4 feet] wide. This water had to be crossed if they wanted to get to the opposite side. The horses stopped; they did not want to enter the water. Seeking help, Alfred looked at the officers. They shouted and insulted him, asking why he did not move forward. Frightened, he turned to his horses and encouraged them to go into the water. In vain! Decisively, Alfred jumped off the wagon, got in front of the horses, took hold of them by the bridle as usual, and led them into the flowing water. Carefully, step by step, he led the vehicle ever deeper into the rushing water. How deep was the hollow? One meter, two meters? No one could answer this question for the little driver. Carefully, placing one foot in front of the other, he tested the depth of the water. Soon he was standing in the water up to his hips. Full of fear, he realized that the current of the water was

getting stronger. A small unevenness in the path caused the water to rise up to under his arms. He had great difficulty keeping his balance. Centimeter by centimeter [inch by inch], the flood rose. When Alfred stood in the rushing water up to his chin, it pulled his legs from under him. With a scream of fear, lying horizontally in the current, he held on to the bridle.

The horses were confused because Alfred was pulling them to the left into the current of the water. Just in time, he realized the danger and grabbed the bridle of the brown mare with his free right hand, which was harnessed on the left side. With his last bit of strength, he pulled himself up to the mare and climbed onto her back.

Hardly had he sat astride the horse when he looked around for the officers and saw one of them leave his seat at the back of the wagon and come forward to take the reins in his hand. He had not yet been able to grasp them when the trough wagon (*Trogwagen*) was whipped around at the back by the shift of weight. At that moment, Alfred saw a new wave thirty to forty centimeters [11.8 to 15.7 inches] high rushing down the slope. And now branches, hay, and weeds, which had likely accumulated at the edge of the water, crashed against the wagon with such force that the standing officer fell sideways into the flood. Fortunately, he had the reins in his hand and was able to hold on in the water. The other officer had also left his seat and was kneeling in the trough of the wagon, who moved alarmingly by holding on to the upright sides of the wagon. The danger increased that it would be carried away like a bathtub, especially since the wagon was now almost aligned with the rushing floodwaters.

Alfred saw that the floods could wash away his trough and therefore urged his horses on. Finally, they reached the other bank, and with a few jumps the horses pulled the wagon onto the saving road. This was all the more difficult because the officer was hanging on the reins. With a loud "Thank God," Alfred dismounted from the horse. And now it was the officers who no longer cursed, but made the sign of the cross in gratitude. Water ran from every seam of the trough, and it continued to drip long after they had reached the higher place. The dust had turned into a liquid mire, and like a chorus of frogs, the sounds made by the hooves pressing into the mud could be heard.

It had become dark by now. Alfred knelt, shivering on his wet raincoat, trying to cover the last few kilometers as quickly as possible. The horses were also hurrying to get into the protective stable. Suddenly, a bright flash tore through the darkness. The thunder followed immediately, and heavy rain began again. The horses immediately slowed to a walking pace. The darkness was complete. The road was no longer visible. Alfred kept the reins tight and let the horses pull. Very slowly, they drew the wagon forward, step by step into the darkness.

Were they still on the road?

On the flat steppe and in this darkness, it was impossible for the boy to tell. As much as Alfred feared the lightning and thunder, he was now grateful for every flash. He could, for a fraction of a second, recognize that he was still on the waterlogged road, and the horses made their way meter by meter through the darkness. And again he had to realize that the horses have a sense for the road and for danger. Why else would the animals not want to go into the rushing water? It was no longer raining so heavily, and suddenly Alfred saw a light in the distance, then another,

and two or three more lights. No doubt about it, they were the lights of his home village. Now the horses began to trot. And now he recognized the house of his parents, which was at the entrance to the village.

Hour after hour, his parents anxiously worried about their boy. In desperation, they had placed a petroleum lamp in every window, hoping to guide their child on his way. They stood at the windows the entire time, yet still they did not see or hear the wagen coming. The rain and darkness were too strong.

Only with great effort could Alfred guide the horses to pass by the farmyard entrance. The officers still had to be taken to their hotel in the small town. Here, they pressed a completely soaked hundred-mark note into the hand of the boy and ran into the hotel. At a quick trot, the horses rushed back into the farmyard, where feed and a protective stable awaited them. With tears in their eyes and thanking God, the frightened parents embraced their boy.

The thunderstorm rain moved further southeast. Still that night, it reached the area around Josefsdorf on the upper Trajan Wall. Here, too, it had not rained for a long time, and the steppe was dry. The little steppe stream Sack barely carried any water, sluggishly flowing through the hot steppe. Finally, the long-awaited rain had arrived. But when it poured from the sky all night and the next day without stopping, people became uneasy.

In the municipality of Mintschuna, the builder Otterstätter had constructed a new house. His masons, Konrad Weishaar and Johann Grässle, were just rough-casting (*verputzen*) the last two windows on the gable of the house when disaster approached the town. They heard a tremendous roar. When they looked up, they saw a flood over a meter [3.28 feet] high coming towards them. The newly built house was struck like a hammer blow. The flood had overflowed the banks of the Sack over a width of about a hundred meters [328 feet], sweeping away everything in its path. It was horrifying to watch how household pets were swept away by the floods; even ducks and geese were carried off. Yes, entire stacks of grain and hay were swept away by the rushing water. They even saw a pigsty made of boards, with its contents, floating by. Moreover, a corn storage building blocked their view. The floods had pressed it against the gable wall of the house, where it remained stuck.

The whole scene was still a terrible-beautiful sight, unique in the steppe. But when two more “grain shocks” (*Kopitzen*) settled behind the corn container and backed up the water, those affected, Weißhaar and Grässle, grew uneasy. They prepared to leave the house and had to realize with horror that the stables and the rear part of the building were already flooded and blocked their exit. The waters rose higher and higher, flooding the entire house. The two climbed onto the storage loft, where they felt safe for an extended period of time.

Suddenly the house shook. The men felt as if the building itself were moving, and in the next moment it crashed. Hundreds of roof tiles flew off, and the front part of the roof sank about fifty centimeters [19.6 inches]. A panic-stricken fear seized the two masons. Filled with fear, they ran to the back part of the house. They wanted to escape from the increasingly strong floods over the roof of the attached stables. They had not yet reached the gable of the house when the gable wall tumbled down with a great crash. From there, they saw that the front wall of the shed

and the horse stable had collapsed. The roof rested on the collapsed rubble. The cracked and fallen roof tiles revealed a view of the horse stable. Two horses were tied to the manger. They pressed themselves lengthwise against the manger; the foal had placed its front feet on the back of its mother and looked around anxiously. It rained continuously. Water ran from the roof through the resulting opening onto the loft and flooded it.

The house threatened to collapse at any moment and bury the two men under it. Full of fear, the two ran across the heavily waterlogged attic to the gable at the street front that was still standing. Once there, they left the house threatened by collapse through the gable window and saved themselves onto the roof of the adjacent corn storage building. Holding onto the boards of the roof, they saw the aftermath: The floodwaters had washed away the fresh earth that had been used to raise the entire farmyard by more than a meter [3.28 feet]. Although the builder had repeatedly compacted the fill with threshing stones and a roller, it was still too fresh to withstand such forces. This deprived the foundation of support, which led to the collapse of the new building. Added to this was the enormous weight of the water, which had accumulated to a height of several centimeters [inches] in the granary.

There was a new terror for the men when the floods suddenly swept away the swaying corn storage building. Fortunately, it drifted to the edge of the floodwaters, where it got stuck on its side in the mud. Suddenly, they heard cries for help and saw cowherder Tabert struggling with the flood. He had left the shepherd house of the neighbor with his child on his shoulders and his wife by the hand to reach the rescuing bank of the floodwaters. With all their strength, the two masons lifted a plank from the corn container and in this way pulled the herder, who was standing in the water up to his arms, and his family to the edge of the rushing flood. Here, a rider came towards him. He held on to the tail of the horse and in this way reached the rescuing solid ground. In the same way, the two masons were also brought to land.

Here the cowherder reported that it had not been possible for him to untie the breeding bulls to drive them to [dry] land. The animals were so agitated that they were standing with their front feet in the manger and had tightened their restraints so firmly that he could not undo them. As the water kept rising, he decided to leave his residence. The horses under the stable were freed just in time before it completely collapsed.

Mr. Johann Grässle told me that severe damage from the flood had also occurred in the communities of Borodino, Beresina, and Lepizig.

The house in Minschuna, which had cost over seventy thousand lei, had to be completely demolished. It was rebuilt in a different location.

[Translation Ends]