

September 6-8, 2009
Gakowo, Filipowo and Doroslo

What makes you want to go there? Why now? Is it safe? These were some of the questions we were asked when we started organizing our trip to Serbia to visit the village of our ancestors. But the five of us were driven by a need and a curiosity that has been building up for many, many years to make this pilgrimage to Filipowo and Gakowo and once we started looking into it everything just fell into place. This is our chronicle.

The five of us are related by our mothers, the Dickmann sisters who first came to the US in the early 1950's, Rose, Anna and Eva. We are Angela (Knoll) Junger, daughter of Rose (Dickmann) Knoll; Robert Hessler, son of Anna (Dickmann) Hessler and Heidi, Eva and Richard Jack, daughters and son of Eva (Dickmann) Jack. All our lives we heard bits and pieces of personal stories from our mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins about a faraway place in Yugoslavia, known for loving childhood memories, horrible tragedy, communism and recent wars, in fact the last European country with border control. A country with so much to offer, but seemingly lost within its own struggles. As adults, we had all read recent books from displaced Donauschwaben to fill in some of the gaps our parents found too painful to talk about. But these stories we had to hear as we searched for who we really are, Americans, but somehow unique from our friends and the rest of the numerous American immigrants.

September 6, 2009

Our meeting place was Budapest and we had arranged to have a guide and a driver to pick us up and take us to Sombor. The plan was to use Sombor as our base and visit Gakovo, Filipovo, and if we had time, Neusatz. Herr Anton Beck, our guide (himself from Sombor and also a Donauschwab) sent an excellent and knowledgeable driver Peter Rang, himself half Croatian, half Donauschwab.

It was a gorgeous day, warm and very sunny with a slight breeze, the perfect weather that only added to our pleasant moods. We were all very excited driving south from Budapest towards the Serbian border, the houses began to look different with the typical enclosed court yards but what really caught our eyes were the thousands upon thousands of paprika plants. As we drove through the small towns, we saw bags of peppers hanging from the roofs, some with so many mesh bags filled with peppers they completely covered the side of the house giving it the appearance of curtains – paprika curtains!

After about 2 ½ hours of driving we came to the border with Serbia. Since the EU formed it has been many years since most of us crossed a border to show passports, in fact we soon learned that the border crossing into Serbia is the last remaining one in Europe.

Sombor was very different from what we were used to as Americans, though a very old city, it felt sadly in need of disrepair. In the historical downtown we could see the influence of the Austrian-Hungarian empire. After the war, the 17 year old Rose Dickmann was sent to work with a Serbian family while Anna Dickmann was sent to

work in the infectious disease ward of a local hospital. We visited the home where we believe Rose worked and we also visited the 2 hospitals in Sombor. There is much to write about our experience in Sombor, but the visit here was not the purpose of our trip. So after we had our first fish paprikasch, which was absolutely fantastic, we were ready for the main purpose of our visit.

We were very surprised to learn from Herr Beck about our Donauschwaben brethren in Sombor. We did not know about this new Donauschwaben club and felt very proud of their efforts to maintain their heritage. We soon learned there are hundreds of members, most of who are graying. Anton and Peter mentioned that many Germans survived the war by being half German and either half Croatian, Hungarian or other local/non-German ethnicity. The club is funded in part by the German government and also temporarily employs a young German woman trained as a sociologist. The club is very much in need of donations and needs our support. They have built a computer room, kitchen, meeting hall and a display of Donauschwaben clothing, and artifacts. There is also a memorial display representing the flight of the Donauschwaben from the country – including an old leather suitcase, a cane and a prayer book.

September 7, 2009

Our first visit was to Gakowo; we were excited as well as nervous to visit the site of the concentration camp that today seems so ordinary yet holds a place of horror and pain for so many. We were told by Herr Beck that this village had approximately 3,000 inhabitants before the war but held 22,000 prisoners when it became a concentration camp. As you pull off the main road into town there is a small old cemetery beside an area overgrown with scraggly trees, grasses and shrubs. We soon learned that this unkempt area is filled with the graves and old tombstones of former German inhabitants of Gakowo. Their overturned, broken and missing tombstones lay between trees and bushes so densely overgrown that you cannot make your way through the area. A path leads through this section to a newer Serbian cemetery and next to this was the saddest and most horrific place we'd ever visited. It is a truly unnerving experience to visit a field – a place that on the surface appears to be nothing more than a field of overgrown grass - and to know that not two feet below the surface are over ten thousand people, many of whom are our ancestors, in a mass grave. Knowing the elderly, the babies, women, the sick – all Germans from the area, had lost their lives so tragically. Our grandmothers, fathers, cousins, uncles, grandfathers – the list goes on – perished there and remain in this unmarked field. One family (we were told this was done under the cover of darkness) had moved their tombstone from the old cemetery to the field so the general location of the mass graves would have a physical marker so as not to forget the location of the mass grave site. Next to the field is a towering metal cross with inscriptions around the base in German, Serbian and English as a memorial to the ethnic Germans who died in Gakovo between 1945 and 1948. We were touched by this memorial and its message meant a lot to us. All of our lives we knew of this place but it felt far, far away; now for the first time it felt real and it was more than our history but our lost family.

As we write this, it is difficult to describe our emotions as we finally visited the place of our parents' birth - Filipowo. After visiting Gakowa, we drove to Filipowa with Peter Rang. Herr Beck was unable to accompany us any further that day because of a previous engagement. Since none of the five of us, or our driver Peter, had ever been to Filipowa and we didn't have any of our moms with us, we really did not know where to go or where anything was but we came somewhat prepared for this. We had a copy of the town map that was prepared by Herr Andreas Rack in 1988 with us and this grid of the town proved to be invaluable to us. Beforehand, we had labeled the houses on the map that we wanted to find, including the Dickmann house and the Jack house but also the Reder, Hoenisch, Urich and Gauss houses. We knew they might not be standing but at least we could visit the sites and take pictures for our relatives so they could later see what we saw.

Excitement built in the van as we approached Filipowo and finally saw the sign marking the entrance to Backi Gracacs. We pulled over next to it and Peter Rang took our picture. At this point we were beyond excited but at the same time somewhat apprehensive – what would we see and experience? Would we be able to locate any of the houses we wanted to see? How would the local people react to us? Our first stop was the cemetery to visit the memorial that was erected not long ago in commemoration of our deceased Donauschwaben ancestors from Filipowa. After placing flowers at the memorial, we drove to the center of town and parked the van across the street from where the church had been. The church no longer stands and a nondescript building that houses an ambulatory/clinic now occupies the site. Using the map, we were able to determine our point of reference and began our walk of the town, slowly strolling along Mittlere Kreuz Gasse and made a left turn on to Razen Gasse, the street our mothers had lived on. We saw very few people along the way; in fact, the town seemed to be almost abandoned. The architectural elements on the houses were beautiful and we were awed by the level of detail in the ornamentation, knowing that this craftsmanship was no longer around. Most of the houses had beautiful tiles lined along the bottom of the front of the house. These tiles varied by home – some were very colorful and decorated with flowers and fleur de li while others were more simple graphic designs of one or two colors. Some of the homes had the names of the former German inhabitants etched on the top side of the houses while others had the year attached. The houses were mostly whitewashed but we also saw varying shades of yellow, blue and orange. Although many of the homes appeared to be in fair condition or renovated, most were not maintained and many appeared to be completely abandoned and in various stages of decay, void of color with bricks and mortar exposed to the elements.

Razen Gasse was completely lined with several varieties of apple trees full of ripe fruit – so much so they were falling and rotting on the ground below the trees. Although we didn't see them, we constantly heard pigeons (or doves?) cooing and that sound was somehow comforting. We counted the lots from the corner – and when we came to the ninth lot (number 311 on the map) we paused and wondered if this really could be the Dickmann residence. A woman came along and Peter Rang started talking with her. Yes, this was her home that she shared with her husband, daughter and son and then the most amazing thing happened – she agreed to let us in to the courtyard to get a better

look. We entered through the large metal gate and then we were inside! This is where our moms were born and raised and here we were, finally standing in that place. It was truly an overwhelming feeling. We showed the husband and wife a photograph of the original house and they confirmed that yes, that house had been there and he was born there! The original house had been torn down because it was in such disrepair and it was replaced with a nondescript new house. But several of the other structures appeared to be from our mother's time. The whitewash was almost gone, the roof line swayed and the brick walls looked very old and crumbling. A very large pile of corn cobs lay in front of us next to the barn. A couple of calves were tied to a barn post. Our driver spoke with the family while the five of us walked around and filmed unsure how long the hospitality would last. Peter later told us they had some cows and calves and sold milk to the regional collective but otherwise they had no income. On the one hand it was sad to see this family living in such poor conditions but on the other hand it was bothersome that they were living in our mothers' homestead. It was difficult not to pass judgment. We walked around outside, through the back fields and filmed and photographed the property hoping we were in the right place and that our mothers would recognize something, anything, from their childhood years. We were not there very long but long enough to take many pictures and video and left to allow the current owners to have their lunch but not before accepting a round of homemade schnapps made from a mixture of fruits with a definite taste of plum. Although our visit was brief, we appreciated their gesture to allow us inside their yard and breathe the air of our ancestors.

We continued along in the same direction to the next block of Razen Gasse, crossing over the Untere Kreuz Gasse, in search of the Hoenisch property but were disappointed to find a different home on that spot. We took some pictures anyway and also of the neighbors on either side in hopes that Rosie or Paul might recognize something. Our next stop was the Urich property, our maternal grandmother's home, on the Letzte Gasse (house number 605 on the map) but again, it no longer stands. Since we were on the Letzte Gasse already we decided to locate the Gauss house (number 591 on the map) on the other side of the Untere Kreuz Gasse. The Gauss house still stands and appears to be somewhat maintained although the whitewash is coming off. We peered through the wooden slats of the high gate and were able to make out a woman standing in the courtyard but otherwise saw nothing but the exterior. After a few minutes, an older man came along and Peter began speaking to him and he invited us in to his courtyard right next door (number 592). This seemed to be a very nice property and as we looked into the yard, we noticed the tiled steps that led to the elaborate tiled back porch of the house. The steps were engraved with the first initial and last name of the Donauschwaben owners, the bottom step said R. Schreiber and the top step said J. Schreiber. (I found out after returning to Virginia and showing my mother the pictures that the Schreibers were her godparents and very good friends of her mother, our grandmother but the inscription on the steps were of the older Schreibers, the parents of our grandmother's friend.) The man living in the Schreiber property was mourning the recent loss of his wife and we were a small diversion to his grief. He seemed to appreciate our interest in visiting Filipowa and was quite gracious in allowing us access to his courtyard.

We continued along and returned to Untere Kreuz Gasse and walked to the end in the direction of the train station to find the Jack house (number 725 on the map) on Had Gasse. We saw no people along the way and that was actually our experience most of the day – the town had very little life. We occasionally saw some people sitting at a café or in front of the daycare center but otherwise it was eerily quiet. The Jack house appears to be in fairly good condition and is painted an unusual orange-rose color. The windows along the street were shuttered tight and we didn't see or hear anyone. We don't know why but we did not ring the doorbell or knock on the door although afterwards we wished we had since we will probably never go back. We took many pictures and posed in front of the house in order to show our relatives later. Would they recognize it? We didn't know but wanted to give them the opportunity to see what we saw. Several ripe fruit trees stand along the street in front of the house and we decided to eat some of the plums and apples which were absolutely scrumptious-a memory we will always cherish.

One more stop before we walked back to the town center where the van was parked. We wanted to see the Reder house, the home of our paternal grandmother. We strolled along Had Gasse, past Bahn Gasse and Juden Gasse before we came to Obere Kreuz Gasse. There on the corner stood the saddest little abandoned whitewashed house (number 674 on the map). You could almost hear the cheerful sounds that once came from that cute home. What must life have been like before the madness? Once again, we picked the ripe plums from the tree planted in front of the house and enjoyed the juicy fruit.

This was our last stop in Filipowa, we were tired from the long emotional day and walked slowly back towards the site of the former church. On our way, we passed the former convent/school which was, to our dismay, decorated with graffiti. We took some more pictures and then decided to drive to the train station. It is no longer functioning as a train station but we did actually see some men inside the building sawing timber.

September 8, 2009

While we were making arrangements for this trip, our guide suggested we might be interested in seeing and experiencing something very special – the Wallfahrt in Doroslo. Anton Beck and Peter Rang came early in the morning to take us to Doroslo. The German mass was to be at 8:00 and we definitely wanted to attend. We didn't know what to expect and we were in awe of the massive amount of pilgrims wearing their traditional folk costumes.