Ethnic German Remigrants (August 22, 1988)

Abstract

Often ignored in the immigration debate were ethnic German resettlers (or remigrants) from Eastern Europe [*Aussiedler*], who, more than forty years after the end of the Second World War, were welcomed "back" to West Germany. Their "return" from countries such as Poland, Romania, and the Soviet Union occurred in the context of détente.

Source

"Now I'm Here, now I'm Good"
SPIEGEL Report about Ethnic German Remigrants and Their Reception in the West

A good forty years after the expulsions, another refugee trek is under way: Germans from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, from Transylvania, the Banat, Silesia, Pomerania, and East Prussia are returning to the "fatherland."
The federal government expects 200,000 ethnic German remigrants this year. But xenophobia, housing shortages, and bureaucratic procedures are turning the return home after centuries into a bitter experience.

Their names are Schäfer, Heinemann, Hildebrandt, and Gärtner. Now and then there's a Ryschkow among them, his first name is Boris, all very familiar.

For the most part, the older ones speak fluent German; the syntax is a little old-fashioned, to be sure, but it sounds like Swabian with some Russian sounds mixed in.

They are coming to Germany as Germans, yet initially they remain foreign to the Germans. They know the Federal Republic only from letters and hearsay. What they associate with this country is only the vague notion of a better future and a long-held desire to live here.

Their long, arduous road to the promised land begins in the Asiatic south of the Soviet Union, in the Kyrgyz Tienshan mountains on the Chinese border, or in the Tajik highlands near Afghanistan. There, at the train stations in Frunze or Dushanbe, they gather for their departure to an unknown homeland, separated from their destination by approximately 6,000 kilometers and a two-to-three-week train trip. Ethnic German remigrants on their way to the West.

Once the train has traversed the Betpak-Dala desert region east of Lake Aral and the lowlands of Turan, passengers from the Soviet Socialist Republics of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, headed for the same destination, climb on board. Once again, there are hundreds of workers, farmers, and artisans who are leaving their homes, farms, and workshops, bringing only what they can carry: crudely tied bundles of clothing, overstuffed suitcases, and tattered cardboard boxes.

West of the Ural Mountains, which separate the European from the Asian part of the USSR, villagers from the Caucasus board the train; in Moscow and Minsk, citizens from Lithuania and Ukraine join the ranks. West of the Soviet border, the train of travelers consolidates into one great trek, a socialism-weary *Internationale* [reference to socialist internationalism]: there, tens of thousands of German-Polish miners and farm workers from Wroclaw and Poznan pack up their household goods and trundle westward in their Polski-Fiats. And they are joined by ethnic German settlers from the Romanian Carpathians, from

cities like Cluj or Sibiu, as well as from countless villages.

For many of them, forcibly resettled multiple times and nowhere rooted, reaching the Federal Republic of Germany means finally realizing a dream they had stopped believing would come true. “All my life I’ve wanted to be a German,” says the Russian-German Valentine Benz (58), who came via Odessa, Poland, Siberian labor camps, and Kazakhstan, “Now I’m here in Germany, now I’m good.”

They all talk blithely about the “Fatherland,” are happy to be “home in the *Reich*.” But no cheers greet them in their rediscovered homeland, no festive ceremony. At most, there is quiet happiness when a family is reunited and a father embraces his son.

Their first impressions are already not the best. When the ethnic German remigrants, exhausted and bewildered, get off the buses in the transit camps at night, there is—as in Nuremberg-Langwasser—a lone man there to greet them. He is someone from the security company, wears a black uniform, carries a service pistol, and issues harsh instructions to the settlers, ordering them about.

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For decades, West German politicians had been demanding such an exodus from the Soviet Union and the Socialist People’s Republics of Poland and Romania. But now that it has so vehemently begun, it is turning into a domestic political problem. To be sure, Chancellor Helmut Kohl declared the integration of the ethnic German remigrants a “national task,” and he appealed to the citizens of the republic to “come together and make every effort to help those fellow countrymen who have come to us feel at home soon.”

But the politicians’ pathos does not reflect the mood of the country. Among the natives, the countrymen from the Carpathians or Kazakhstan are met with palpable distrust, exasperation, and incomprehension.

Older citizens of the republic, who still remember the misery of the postwar years, refuse to accept that now, forty-three years after the end of the war, there are still—or suddenly once again—large numbers of ethnic German remigrants. To younger citizens unfamiliar with the historical and political background, the immigrants with their broken German and old-fashioned clothes, headscarves, and felt shoes come across as simply strange.

And everywhere among West Germans is a pervasive fear that an army of economic refugees and freeloaders is pouncing on their jobs, affordable housing, and social welfare, that they could make life difficult for them and diminish their prosperity. The *Diakonisches Werk* [social welfare agency] of the Protestant Church in Germany is concerned: “Right now, ethnic German remigrants are also seen as foreigners alongside guest workers and asylum seekers.”

Counselors to ethnic German remigrants in Nuremberg are registering a “dangerous rise in xenophobia.” SPD city councilor Siegfried Pogadi, in his main job as a deputy warehouse manager in Unna-Massen, sometimes hears “very odd statements” in the Dortmund neighborhood of Scharnhorst, where 4,000 ethnic German remigrants from Poland have been housed, such as: “Pretty soon, it will be just like Poland here; it can’t go on like this, they’re taking away our jobs.”

The Russian-German Maria Rösler, who has been living for more than a year in a residential home in Tübingen with her husband and three children, was threatened with “punishment” by the housing management, “because we don’t leave.” Her explanation [in accented German]:

“We sit in one room and don’t know where to go. There are no flats. And the people are afraid of us. They don’t want resettlers. That’s first. Second: we have no jobs. They don’t want us. What should we do? Go where? Buy a tent?”

Hildegard Gärtner (35), who came eight years ago from a village in Transylvania, where she had always "felt like a German," had similar experiences. "Here," she says, "we were suddenly the foreigners."

In German government offices, ethnic German remigrants are sometimes referred to pejoratively as "Polacks" or "Russki." The saleswoman in a Göttingen supermarket near the Friedland transit camp has this to say about the newcomers who shop there: "they should stay where they came from, they're taking jobs away from us."

For three months now, as many as 20,000 ethnic German remigrants have been arriving each month, and estimates from Bonn put the total as high as 200,000 by the end of the year. They are almost exclusively "Germans as defined by the Basic Law," Germans whose fate had been a burning issue for Bonn's foreign policy for decades, and whose reception is now seen as a "national challenge of the highest order" (in the words of Baden-Württemberg's Minister President Lothar Späth).

Chancellor Kohl is exhorting politicians and fellow citizens "to receive these countrymen with open arms." But because they are arriving in such large numbers, many have to sleep in run-down barracks, gymnasiums, and tents at first.

Starting with Konrad Adenauer, the federal government repeatedly tried in vain to unite the dispersed and distressed Germans in the East with their relatives in the West. It succeeded only in isolated cases and was usually thwarted by the hostile stance of the Eastern Bloc states, which regarded their German minorities as leverage and bargaining chips. But now it might be possible, as though the Iron Curtain were pulled aside, for all of them to come at once, if they want to and are able to. That would be:

→ Nearly two million Russian-Germans, descendants of the German emigrants who once settled along the Volga and the Black Sea; they were deported by Stalin to the inhospitable steppes of Asia and had been brought by the Nazis into the conquered "Warthegau" in Poland;

→ about three-quarters of a million Pomeranians, Silesians, and East Prussians within the current borders of Poland; they were spared the expulsions, but all of them were expropriated and stripped of their minority rights;

→ about 230,000 Transylvanian Saxons, Banat and Sathmar Swabians from Romania, some of whose ancestors had emigrated to the Carpathian region as many as eight hundred years ago and cultivated a German cultural tradition in places like Klausenburg (Cluj) or Hermannstadt (Sibiu). That tradition is being systematically destroyed under Romanian president Nicolae Ceausescu.

In the coming years, the German Red Cross expects that another 1.4 million Germans from Eastern Europe and the Asian Soviet Republics will want to come. "Reality is catching up with our demands," as Edmund Stoiber, the head of the Bavarian State Chancellery, described the situation at the end of July, "the trickle is suddenly turning into a torrent."

By its own admission, the Caritas Association, which can attend to a maximum of 50,000 ethnic German remigrants a year, is facing "a complete collapse this year." As one association spokesperson reported, "desperate pleas for help are reaching us from more and more local branches."

Friedland, Unna, and Nuremberg, the three large reception and transit camps for ethnic German remigrants in the Federal Republic, are supposed to channel the stream of people into the federal states and local communities. They can barely manage that task. According to the director of the Friedland camp, Randolf Brand, "the situation is dramatic."

Conditions in this border camp in Lower Saxony are reminiscent of the grim postwar years with their expellee treks and late returnees from the war. Food is served in field kitchens; the ethnic German

remigrants, currently more than 3,200 instead of the maximum 1,800, are sorted into mass accommodations in gymnasiums and schools. One camp supervisor offered this assessment: “A hen in a battery cage has more room.”

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Additionally, the many “transitional housing facilities” made available to ethnic German remigrants by the states and local communities have long since become overcrowded. Local authorities are renting hotel rooms and guest houses. To get any kind of accommodations at all, remigrants are sometimes advised to pretend they are asylum-seekers. Many have been living in homeless shelters for weeks.

But according to their West German counselors and advisors, almost all remigrants are possessed of an “unwavering confidence,” “stoic calm,” and a willingness “to endure great hardships”—happy, when all is said and done, that they were allowed to move to the “free West” at all.

There are various reasons why so many are now allowed to do so. Since January 1987, USSR applicants, who had been subject to the whims of Soviet bureaucrats for decades, are being treated in strict accordance with the new emigration ordinance: it permits emigration to all Soviet citizens who professed their German nationality in the 1979 census and who are able to show an invitation from close relatives abroad.

For years, the entry “German” in one’s passport brought disadvantages to those who claimed it, for example, in job placement or the allocation of housing. However, since Gorbachev, its effect has been that applications for emigration—previously rejected multiple times—are now being approved quickly and, according to the impressions of the Foreign Office in Bonn, also “quite generously.”

Officially, the People’s Republic of Poland no longer has any Germans and thus no grounds for family reunification. Yet between January and July [1988] more than 10,000 citizens were given permission to emigrate—more than ever before during a comparable period.

But the majority of those coming from Poland—40,000 during the last six months—are initially coming as tourists, and as such were allowed to leave the country almost unimpeded. According to their reports, the Polish authorities are even recommending visitor visas for citizens who want to leave—knowing full well that those tourists are hardly going to return as Polish citizens.

What looks so generous and tolerant on the face of it is intended, in reality, to benefit the People’s Republic in two ways. First, the Warsaw government is hoping for a bit of relief from domestic pressure and the catastrophic supply situation; second, the Polish state, highly indebted to the West, is unabashedly interested in collecting hard currency.

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Money opens wide the floodgates for emigrants; in the case of Romania, this has been common practice for ten years, though now it seems to be assuming forms that are as gigantic as they are grotesque. The Federal Republic of Germany, which signed a secret agreement with Bucharest in 1978, has been paying a bounty of 8,000 Marks to the Romanian state bank for each emigrant since then. To date, 120,000 Transylvanian Saxons and Banat Swabians have been ransomed this way for a total of around one billion Marks.

German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who was in Bucharest at the end of last year [1987] to negotiate an extension and expansion of the resettler agreement (which was previously capped at 12,000 persons annually) discovered that the human commodity has become much more expensive in the meantime: Romania’s Ceausescu is now demanding 15,000 Marks per person.

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It's understandable that a memorandum from the *Landsmannschaften* [Associations of Ethnic Germans] that was sent along with Foreign Minister Genscher sounds like a cry of distress: in their old homeland, according to the memorandum, there was now only an "uprooted and hopelessly splintered remnant of the once cohesive ethnic groups that have long since ceased to be salvageable. Emigration is a collective flight from national extinction."

Ethnic German remigrants in the year 1988—this is not a neo-Germanic migration, but a German reparation for the emigrants, the marginalized, and the exploited who, directly or indirectly, had to suffer the longest from the fact that at one time half the world was to be "cured of its ills by the German character."

The Western press, in particular, likes to speculate that when residents of Siberia, for example, suddenly become Germans, they are motivated by *völkisch* [ethnic] thinking. Thus, the New York-based *Wall Street Journal* wonders about the "peculiar German definition of citizenship." In general, birthplace is determinative, argues the paper, "but in Germany it is blood that counts."

The suspicion is absurd. Rather, it is precisely the historical legacy of the Nazi era that explains the constitutional imperative to help ethnic German remigrants and "descendants of German nationals" acquire the rights of a citizen of the Federal Republic—including citizenship. Thus, in the official language of the Bonn Ministry of Justice, the specific legal definition of an ethnic German remigrant reads as follows: "Germans without German nationality with a special status similar to citizenship."

On the other hand, remigrants are often shocked to find that they are not accepted as real Germans. "If I have preserved 200 years of Germanness," says Anton Bosch from the *Landsmannschaft* of the Germans from Russia, "I don't want to be labeled a Russian, a Soviet German, or a German-Russian. That's what hurts us on the inside." A thirty-year-old woman from Poland made the situation clear in Bonn: "Over there, we were the German pigs, here we are the Polacks."

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