

Gajdobra – Jarek - Gakowa

My experiences to the extermination camps Jarek and Gakowa (today: Gakovo).

By Magdalena Abel from Gajdobra

Translated by Sieghart Rein

"I was driven from our house in ***Gajdobra*** in April 1945 by Serbian partisans. I had to abandon the house within 3 minutes with my two small children, Hildegard, one-and-a-half years old, and Leni, three years old. I put Hildegard into the baby carriage, took Leni by the hand; she walked next to me. In my arm I had a basket into which I hurriedly put half a loaf of bread, in order to have something to eat for my two children.

We, all the Germans from the village, were driven to the church square by the Tito-partisans with fixed rifles. On the way one woman (a partisan) ran up to me and tore the basket with the bread from my arm. She shouted into my face: "Where you are going, you don't need that anymore!" We then had to spend the night on the church square in the open, without eating and drinking.

Gajdobra was a purely German village with about 3,000 inhabitants. In the village there were yet only women, children and old people. The men fit for military service were all in the war with the German army. My husband, too, and my father were in the war; I didn't know where they were and whether they were alive still.

The next day, in the morning, we had to fall in. At a table sat partisans, who wrote down our names. We were separated into two groups. Into one group the strong-looking village inhabitants, who probably were still able to work were placed. We learned later they were destined for the camp in Gajdobra and had to work in the hemp factory.

Women with small children, the aged and the frail were put into the other group. They were classified as not able to work. I, with my two small children, was put into this group. We had to fall in on the street and were driven into the direction of our tavern.

Suddenly a partisan came up to me and shoved my baby carriage away from me. I was just able to pull my little Hildegard from the carriage. She then kicked the carriage that it landed in the roadside ditch. I was unable to retrieve the carriage because we were guarded left and right by the partisans. I put my Hildegard on my arm and took my Leni by the hand. We had to march heavily guarded along the street thusly.

My three-year-old Leni had taken her doll along and pressed it hard against her body. Then several children (probably belonging to partisans) came running along, tore the doll from her arm and took it away with them. My daughter cried and begged me to get her doll back. But I could do nothing; the partisans threatened to shoot me if I went away from the street.

Arriving at the tavern, we were searched. All valuables such as jewelry, wedding rings, earrings, money were taken from us. Also from the children necklaces were simply ripped off and the earrings, if they didn't come off right away, were torn from their ears.

We had the custom that all girls, after their baptism, received a golden necklace with a cross and golden earrings. At the tavern the children cried, bled and screamed in pain. But the partisans showed no compassion, on the contrary, they took delight in tormenting the children in front of their mothers.

In front of the tavern we had to fall in again and march to the train station. There we were put into cattle cars. About fifty people were cooped up in one wagon; women, infants, old men and women. The train left then; we didn't know where to.

At evening the train stopped; it was in *Jarek* (today: *Bački Jarak*).

At the camp we had to fall in front of the commandant's office; we were searched and had to submit to a body search. The very last things as head and neck scarves, wraps or a last piece of jewelry were taken away from us. A heavily pregnant young woman from Gajdobra had baby rompers hidden under her clothes. When they were found the weeping woman was tormented, pushed back and forth; the baby clothes were then taken from her and held up and shown to all of us, in addition to that the inhuman phrase of a Tito-partisan: "You don't need that anymore!"

After that we were all separated into houses in the camp. The houses had been emptied of their contents. There were no furnishings or furniture anymore. In the houses were already Danube Swabians from other villages. I was put in a house in which many people were lying on the floor everywhere. In a last corner we were lying on the bare floor. For my two small children I received some straw from the fellow prisoners. With that I could at least lay my tired and completely exhausted children on some straw. There was nothing to cover them with, also nothing to eat and drink.

The village *Jarek* was a horrible extermination camp. It was completely overcrowded with many thousands of Danube Swabians. They were mainly women, children and the aged. The people were starved and emaciated to the bones. There were no toilets or washrooms. The people were dirty and had lice. Many illnesses and contagious diseases such as typhus, spotted fever, etc. spread throughout the camp. To that was added the catastrophically bad food. An unimaginable famine prevailed. Once a day, and that not always, there was a vanishingly small amount of an unsalted water-soup, in which seldom and only occasionally a bean could be found.

Every day many people died and their number got to be more daily. The dead had to be placed in front of the houses and were tossed on a cart pulled by a horse. The horse cart drove every day through the camp, overfull with our dead fellow countrymen. A horrible view, as arms, legs, heads of the dead were hanging down from the cart. The dead were put in mass graves.



*The (former) cemetery in Jarek in 1965, as seen from the street.
The dead of the camp were initially buried in the tombs
until they were filled. After that there were six rows
of mass graves dug behind the cemetery (see below).
(See also: *The Internment Camp Jarek*)*

The camp Jarek was a terrible death camp, in which we Germans were to be killed.

There was a camp commandant by the name of Jana, a devil's woman in female form. She rode on her horse through the camp and with her whip struck at every inmate whom she could get hold of, regardless of whether they were emaciated children, half-starved women or old frail people. Also she rode into the houses with her horse, over the inmates and let them be trampled on with the hooves of her horse until they remained lying there covered in blood or lifeless. For this Tito-partisan there were never enough of the daily dead Danube Swabians. She demanded that there had to be more.

And it got to be more. There was hardly anything to eat. Countless fellow countrymen starved to death, died of illnesses, were killed. We were all doomed. The camp Jarek became hell.

Into the camp constantly came new transports of fellow countrymen, among them were also further relatives: My grandparents (the parents of my father), the grandparents of my husband, on his mother's and father's side, a cousin two years old, a cousin seven years old and Toni, a neighbor, who only had one arm. After several days my two-year-old cousin died. Toni was brutally battered by the guards and locked into a cellar without food or drink. A man came to us, who was looking for men, who were to work for him outside of the camp. We gave him Toni's name. The man had compassion on the one-armed man and bought Toni from the administration of the camp. Thereby he cheated certain death.

The pregnant young woman from Gajdobra has brought her child into the world without physician and midwife, on a small heap of straw. Both died shortly after. Also my grandparents (Johann Annasenzl and Elisabeth, née Flock), the grandparents of my husband on his father's side (Johann Abel and Magdalena, née Wunderlich), my husband's grandparents on his mother's side (Adam Tillinger and Katharina, née Tritschler) have succumbed to a miserable death.



*Mass graves in the Jarek cemetery (in the year 1965).
(See also: The Internment Camp Jarek)*



*Mass graves behind the Jarek cemetery (in the year 1965).
(See also: The Internment Camp Jarek)*

In order that my two small children would get something to eat at least every once in awhile, I have not eaten anything for days. My little Hildegard, however, did not do well health wise. I was distraught and impotent to see how her body became constantly weaker. Regrettably it wasn't enough for my little Hildegard. In October 1945 she died miserably in my arms. She didn't even get to be two years old. From old wooden sticks we fashioned a makeshift coffin-like frame, put her into it and put it down in front of the house. When the death-cart arrived with the guards, one of them had stepped on it and trampled around my dead Hildegard. He then threw my dead child in a high arc onto the death-cart. Such brutality of this Tito-partisan was incomprehensible to me. I was dejected and at an end with my strength.

But suddenly there was the possibility to get to a salasch to work there. I have reported and I succeeded in getting to the Kamendin-Pusztta with my daughter Leni. Although I was very weak physically, I gathered new optimism and performed difficult field and stable work. I was able to secretly bring something to eat for my daughter and me. However, this was strictly forbidden.

At the beginning of January 1946 a transport from Gajdobra arrived in Jarek. The inmates had to travel the far distance on foot during icy cold and snow. Through a watchman at our salasch, who was also deployed at Camp Jarek, I learned that my mother, too, was with that transport (Theresia Annasenzl, née Eichinger).

That she was still alive and was near here was like a miracle to me. I tried everything humanly possible to get her out of Camp Jarek and to bring her to me and my daughter Leni at the salasch.

After two months, in spring of 1946, I succeeded after many struggles. My daughter and I were overjoyed when we were able to enfold her in our arms. My mother also had to work at the salasch. However, we couldn't move about freely, for we were guarded by watchmen here also. Every night we had to fall in and were counted, to make sure that no one was missing. Only then were we allowed to lie down to sleep. For that purpose we were put into old empty pigsties, which were locked. We lay on stone floors, which were covered with straw; and we, too, covered ourselves with straw. The sanitary and hygienic conditions were very bad. Besides, we never got any clothing and wore the same old ragged clothes the entire time.

Before Christmas 1946 my daughter Leni contracted typhus badly. I with my mother had to fight for the life of my daughter without medicines and a physician. I had great fear of also losing my Leni, who in the meantime was four-and-a-half years old. We made compresses and tea to drink from grasses and herbs. She lay motionless and nearly lifeless on the straw in the cold pigsty. Yet my daughter recovered slowly; she opened her eyes and moved. She was saved.

But after a short time I became ill and contracted typhus also. I couldn't work any more and lay in the pigsty; was unconscious several days and overcame the illness only very slowly. I had just got somewhat well when we had to leave the salasch.

At the start of 1947 — it was still winter — we were loaded onto open trucks. An icy wind had us almost freeze to death. We sat my daughter on the floor and covered her with our remaining skirt remnants. We were driven to the train station in Srbobran in deep snow. There we were put into open cattle cars and rode by train several hours in the icy cold. The train stopped finally and we had to get out. The watchmen drove us on foot through the deep snow. We hardly had shoes on our feet and rags as clothes. Several children and old people were left to lie in the snow exhausted where they probably froze to death.

We had arrived at the Camp *Gakowa* (today: *Gakovo*).

It was a concentration camp, an extermination camp, a death camp, a starvation camp. We were cooped up in houses, in which many half-starved people were lying already. We lay on bare, ice-cold floors. At night rats came which bit off noses and ears of those inmates who were too weak and could not defend themselves. Horrible cries of pain were heard every night. In order to prevent that from happening to my daughter Leni, I have obtained two wood billets, with which my mother and I struck at the rats and kept them away.

A deep cesspool on which several heavy harrows lay, served for the purpose of relieving oneself. Since the pit was not covered entirely, small children and frail aged fell repeatedly into the pit and drowned in the stinking sludge teeming with worms. We have agreed to never go there alone but always to go together. There was hardly anything to eat in the camp. Daily there were many dead people, who were thrown on a death cart and who were put into mass graves. It became clear to me that in our bad fettle we wouldn't survive this camp.

We heard repeatedly that camp inmates were escaping. Many were shot to death by the guards while escaping; several were successful in their escape. In order to stay alive I saw only the possibility for us to escape. In camp I met one-armed Toni again, who had been in Camp Jarek with us. Together with him, I found out how and when the watchmen were relieved. We also knew that the Hungarian border was not far away. Thus the decision was made that we escape from the camp.

My mother, my daughter Leni, I and Toni with his mother waited for a favorable time. In May 1947 we dared at night to sneak out of the camp. The guards had just left their position, when we slid on all fours over a field of clover. All went well; no one had seen us. Soon we had reached a forest and went in the direction of the Hungarian border. With other escapees we got across the border to Hungary. In order not to be discovered, we marched only at night. During the day we hid or begged for bread at isolated farms. Nevertheless, we were stopped by Hungarian soldiers. But when they saw in what miserable condition we were they let us continue.

After a few days a young man attached himself to us. He was a German soldier, who had escaped from a prisoner-of-war camp. He had been an airplane pilot and was shot down over Yugoslavia. With him and his knowledge of geography we reached the Austrian border. After a two-month difficult march through Hungary we reached an Austrian reception camp. There we found out through the Red Cross that my husband, my father and my sister were still alive and were in Germany, in Bavaria. In July 1947 we were reunited with the members of our family."

“I am now 88 years old; my worst two years were those in the death camps of Jarek and Gakowo.”

“There many thousands of innocent German Danube Swabians lost there lives. It was not enough for the murderous Tito-henchmen to take all our worldly goods, no, they wanted to exterminate us Germans in a savage bestial manner.

What have children, like my two-year-old Hildegard, or we women, who took care of their children and their household, done to the Tito-regime? We lived peacefully and amicably in my hometown Gajdobra with other Serbian villages together and mutually helped each other. Inhabitants of those villages came after the end of the war to speak up for us, so that we shouldn't be put into extermination camps. But these people were threatened by the Tito-people or even arrested themselves.

We saw next to nothing of the war in Gajdobra. It was quiet by us; there were no aerial attacks and no hostilities. It was all the worse after the war's end in 1945. While there was peace in all of Europe, we were detained and murdered in extermination camps. Why didn't the Tito-regime let us leave for Austria and Germany just like other expellees? During the years 1946 and 1947 the reconstruction began already in Germany; we, in contrast, had to waste away in death camps unobserved from the world's public view!”

“The unparalleled genocide of us Danube Swabians is so vicious and incomprehensible because it was perpetrated after the war's end and years thereafter.”

Magdalena Abel from Gajdobra

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