



THE DANUBE SWABIANS

(Donauschwaben)

The Danube Swabians are the descendants of German colonists who settled during the 18th century around the Danube River and its tributaries, in an area widely known as the Pannonian Lowland. They came from the overpopulated westernmost part of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation (Rhineland, Palatinate, Alsace-Lorraine, etc.) and also from Austria, Bavaria and Bohemia to a land that, after almost two centuries under Turkish rule (1526 to 1718), was depopulated, devastated, swamp covered and, although potentially fertile, vastly neglected and uncultivated. In three waves, each coinciding with the reigns of Emperor Karl VI (1711-1740), Empress Maria Theresia (1740-1780), and Emperor Josef II (1780-1790), those settlers traveled in barges hundreds of miles down the Danube River to their new homesteads in the frontier land of the southeastern part of the Empire, the Kingdom of Hungary. Theirs was not an easy lot. Famine, Plague, swamp fever and sporadic assaults by Turkish bands were their constant challenges. An estimated 40% of the first-generation settlers perished without ever seeing the fruits of their labor. However, their pioneer spirit prevailed, and during the next two hundred years, they succeeded in transforming a swampland into the “Breadbasket” of Europe.

The political instability of the region hardly disturbed the settlers, for they were loyal, honest and God-fearing citizens who provided for their families. But they also loved their language and their cultural heritage. In their settlements, they maintained their own schools and churches. Their cities became centers of German culture with German-language newspapers and theatres. But a friendly relation with their neighbors of various nationalities necessitated the mastering of other languages, too, and so, many settlers became multilingual in a natural and beneficial way. It should be mentioned that the name “Swab” (Schwabe) was first applied to the settlers by their neighbors, mostly teasingly, but sometimes in a defiant way, too.

From 1790 to the end of the 19th century, the number of the settlers had increased sevenfold. Since the land had become scarce, many families moved away in search for better living conditions. Many ventured across the ocean to the “promised Land.” Between 1890 and 1930, about 350,000 came to America, where they became known as “German-Hungarians.”

The fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of the First World War brought about a drastic change: the area was divided up among Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Romania. It was around this time that the name “Danube Swabians” emerged as a collective denotation for all the German-speaking people whose ancestors had settled alongside the Danube two hundred years earlier.

The tragic events of the Second World War all but eradicated the Danube Swabians’ population in that area. The 700,000 Danube Swabians in Yugoslavia were deprived of their citizenship, and their property was confiscated. Thousands of able-bodied men were executed, thousands of young women were abducted for forced labor to Russia, and the rest were thrown into concentration camps where, between 1945 and 1949, tens of thousands perished from starvation, maltreatment, and various diseases. The largest part of the 650,000 Danube Swabians in Hungary were “Repatriated” (expelled) to Germany, leaving all their property behind. Thousands of the 350,000 Danube Swabians in Rumania were forcefully displaced to the Baragan Steppes near the Black Sea, where a great number of them perished.

Those Danube Swabians who escaped before the Communist tide swept through their land and most of those who survived the ordeal of the concentration and forced-labor camps found refuge in the Western World. The largest part settled in Germany and Austria, the land of their forefathers. Many migrated to Australia, South America, and Canada. About 100,000 came to the United States where they quickly adapted to the new way of life. Here, too, diligence, thrift, and honesty are their main character traits, as are loyalty and faithfulness to their new homeland. But here, too, they take pride in their language and their cultural heritage.

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