



Alina Helwig

Between the Crimea,
Kazakhstan and
Germany – Magdalena
Schweiger on the
search for home

August 2016 marked the 75th anniversary of the deportation and expulsion of the German population to the eastern territories of the former Soviet Union. Immediately after the German army's attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, nearly two thirds of the approximately one million Germans living in the European areas of the USSR were deported to its Asian parts, mainly Siberia, Kazakhstan and the Urals, by the Soviet regime (see Fleischhauer 1982, 318). Faced with the rapid advance of German troops, the USSR's Presidium of the Supreme Soviet justified the ethnically motivated and already ongoing deportation activities in a decree dated 28 August 1941 with the charge that the German population was covering up for "thousands and tens of thousands of diversionists [saboteurs] and spies" (Maurach 1955, 348ff.) in its midst. Although the right to self-determination had been established in the meantime in the form of territorial autonomy (Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic), the events of 1941 marked a tragic high point of the "germanophobic policies" (Krieger 2015, 10). These had set in at the end of the 19th century with ethnically and economically motivated discrimination, expulsion and the withdrawal of privileges, and would culminate in expropriation during Stalin's forced collectivisation drive and ethnic cleansing campaigns (see Neutatz 1992, 81; Krieger 2015, 9ff.). As victims of two totalitarian regimes seeking territorial expansion – with Stalin's ideological nationality-based policy on the one side and the eastward expansion of the National Socialists on the other – flight, expulsion and persecution number amongst the formative collective experiences of the so-called *Russlanddeutsche* (see Krieger 2013, 5). They are the descendants of colonists who had heeded the calls since Catherine II's in the 1760s to settle in the thinly populated territories of her great realm. Sought-for at the time were farmers, tradesmen and merchants who were initially meant to predominantly settle in the lower Volga river area and southern Ukraine. The emigrants mostly came from small states in the German south-west such as Württemberg, Baden, Palatinate, Alsace and Lorraine, where military and confessional conflicts prevailed at the time, along with a difficult economic situation that made many people decamp. Farming land, tax reliefs, self-government, freedom of worship and unlimited exemption from military service were also decisive migration factors (see Eisfeld 1999, 16f.). The colonists from Germany were able to attain considerable prosperity not long after their arrival and built up large farming operations, established trade guilds, also played a decisive part in the manufacture of farming equipment, founded churches and developed their own school system.¹ An initial phase of cultural and economic growth was repeatedly followed by nationality-based public hostilities and discriminations that flared up again and again. A policy aimed at the russification of the German population resulted in a cultural orientation towards Germany. But this never jeopardised the performance of duties and loyalty vis-à-vis the respective Russian regime (see Neutatz 1992, 94). This was not least of all demonstrated in the First World War when up to 60 percent of all draftable men of German origin from the Black Sea region fought in the Russian army.² A

new, region-based self-understanding successively established itself—with the immigrants viewing themselves as Volga Germans, Black Sea Germans, Caucasus Germans or Crimea Germans (see Krieger 2015, 7).

The settlement of the Crimean Peninsula by German emigrants then ultimately also set in from 1804 after it had finally fallen to the Tsarist Empire with the end of the Russian-Turkish wars in 1783. In all likelihood, these colonists from Germany's southern regions also included the ancestors of my great-grandmother Magdalena Schweiger. They established a settlement called Rosental, where my great-great-grandparents were born between 1874 and 1882, as oral tradition has it.

Crimea—the lost homeland

Magdalena Schweiger³ was born on the Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula on 6 April 1915 as the youngest of the eleven children of spouses Kenefefa German (née Eisenbraun) and Ignat German. The family owned a small farm building and a piece of land that secured their livelihood and permitted feed cultivation for animal husbandry. Magdalena worked at the farm of her parents, while other siblings moved to other villages when they married or had jobs in the surrounding towns. Magdalena never came to know many of her brothers and sisters in the first place, however, because they had died at an early age from diseases such as pneumonia. Only five of them reached adult age. When the Tsarist Empire fell in 1917, the Crimea witnessed frequent changes of government until 1920 and was the site of a Russian civil war between the so-called Red and White Armies, accompanied by attacks on the German colonies perpetrated by a number of itinerant gangs, and by massive food levies from the Bolsheviks (see Eisfeld 1999, 91). Young men of a draftable age were pressed into military service on both sides. When the soldiers came to the home village of Magdalena's family once again in their search for young men, one of her older brothers hid in a granary to evade conscription. He tragically suffocated in an attempt to dig himself into the mountain of grains. This would not remain the only fateful event the family of Magdalena Schweiger had to endure in the interwar years. ▶ Fig. 1

The forced collectivisation campaigns and reorganisation of farming at the end of the 1920s also affected Magdalena's family as farmers. They lost the land they owned, which was incorporated in collective farms. As early as 1930, 75 percent of the Crimean farmers were coerced into giving up their farms and joining the state's new cooperatives by threats of resettlement and of physical and psychological violence⁴ (see Eisfeld 1999, 109). When Magdalena was around 17 years old, the Ukraine suffered a catastrophic famine in 1932 and 1933 that can now, in retrospect, be identified as a direct consequence of the rush into forced collectivisation (see Krieger 2013, 3). Millions of people perished while thousands upon thousands fled to the Crimea from the starvation in the northern Ukraine. Refugees also sought help from Magdalena and her family. Her father, Ignat



Fig. 1 Magdalena Schweiger (top right) with two of her elder sisters and her parents a few years before their deportation to Kazakhstan, ca. 1935 Crimea

| Privately owned / photographer unknown

German, took pity on them and shared the food he had, although his own family was threatened by hunger as well. The stories told by the family's acquaintances painted a horrific picture. Most of all seniors, children and the infirm were starving to death. Mr. and Mrs. German passed away in the mid-1930s and Magdalena met the driver Nikolai Schweiger. They married and soon had two children—Alexander in 1938 and Alina in 1940. The situation of the Germans in the Soviet Union continued to deteriorate at the very same time. First arrests and deportations of so-called unreliable elements amongst the collective farmers had already taken place in 1935. Two years later, Stalin prepared a resolution by the Central Committee's Politburo ordering the arrest of "Imperial Germans" in arms factories (see Krieger 2009, 153f.). The rights to au-

tonomous self-government were withdrawn and teaching of the native language was prohibited. The fate of the Crimea Germans was finally sealed by the decree of August 1941 and subsequent deportation to Siberia and Kazakhstan.⁵ The systematic nature of the process and organised deportation of hundreds of thousands of Germans from the European part of the Soviet Union suggest that this idea had not been born in response to the German army's attack on the USSR at all, but planned long before that. Witnesses have reported that lists of all Germans currently living in the Soviet Union were drawn up as early as 1934. These preparations for the banishment of a national minority were also linked with the National Socialists' rise to power in Germany and with the Soviet Union's redoubled foreign policy efforts aimed at improved preparations for a possible military attack by Germany (see Fleischhauer 1982, 318ff.).

In some places, people only had a few hours between the announcement and their deportation. Under the pretence of being taken to the hinterland for their own protection from the acts of war, the people concerned were told to lock their doors and hand the keys to those responsible. Their farms and animals would be looked after until they returned, which would only be a matter of months, anyway. So the people just packed a little clothing and food, lacking the time for more. But the deported would never see their old homes again, there would be no compensation for the properties they had left behind, and they would even be forced to provide written waivers for them later on. They covered the distance

in horse-drawn carts, crossed the Caspian Sea by boat, and then travelled on by rail in livestock wagons. Especially seniors and the sick would often not survive this journey of several weeks, particularly in the cold winter months. The dead were left lying by the wayside or thrown overboard into the water. Nobody knew where they were being conveyed to or what would happen to them. Dressed in nylon stockings and summer shoes because of the warm Crimean climate, they arrived in what felt like nowhere, up to their hips in snow. Others had shown greater presence of mind in this exceptional situation and put on as many garments as possible to swap them for food at stops along the transport route. Once they arrived at their destinations, they often found that these still lacked barrack facilities for the German “special settlers”, so that they had to spend the first months living in damp and cold burrows which they had to dig for themselves. Magdalena was deported to Kazakhstan with her husband and two children in August, and allocated to an already existing kolkhoz in the Semiosjor-noje district in the north of the country in November of the same year.

Despite their settlement in Kazakhstan—and particularly because of these traumatizing historic events—the generation who had been put through all this considered the Crimea their home and often looked back on it wistfully after the deportation, linked with the hope to be able to return to their original settlement areas one day. The loss of their home was immanent and played a decisive part for the identity of the generation who had personally experienced the deportation. Magdalena, too, would always—even after coming to the Federal Republic of Germany in 1993 as a so-called late emigrant—refer to the Crimea as her home for as long as she lived, even if she had spent half a century of that life in Kazakhstan. This and the fact that she understood Germany as a kind of second home and / or home of her ancestors also tallies with the findings of a 1999 study in Siberia concerning “ethnic identity and settlement strategies of Russian Germans” (see Schönhuth 2006).

Kazakhstan—the imposed home

The resettlement of many national minorities, amongst whom the Germans were the largest group, from the Soviet Union’s crisis areas to Kazakhstan was no coincidence. After the failure of an attempt to recolonise Kazakhstan in the 1930s, over half a million deportees were now meant to cover the higher demand for labour arising from the war-related relocation of many industrial operations to that republic. They were a significant economic factor⁶ (see Eisfeld 1999, 128). ▶ Fig. 2
Years of sacrifice awaited the new arrivals in the vast landscape of Kazakhstan once they had reached their barrack settlements. The accommodations lacked everything in the way of clothing, heating and food. Day after day was characterised by hard physical labour. From as early as October 1941, male German settlers would be conscripted to the so-called labour army, later on also childless women and mothers who no longer needed to look after small infants. While

Magdalena had to work as a milkmaid in a collective farm, her husband was forced to become a driver at an industrial location near Chelyabinsk north of Kazakhstan from January 1942. Visits were only rarely possible. Even if the lives these labour camps offered differed in terms of the work performed and the composition of the workforce—deportees, prisoners, POWs, political dissidents—they still had one thing in common: they resembled prisons. Those concerned saw themselves faced with the strictest surveillance, harassment, continuous defamation as fascist, and inadequate food rations.

This is the world my grandmother Ekaterina was born into as Magdalena and Nikolai's third child in 1943. She can still vividly remember what it was like to grow up in a barrack settlement of this nature as a child. Hunger was a frequent companion and one needed to be able to fend for oneself. As a milkmaid, her mother Magdalena was also responsible for feeding the calves. If the supervisor was nowhere to be seen, she would shout an agreed signal word for the children to secretly sneak into the stable and quickly drink some of the fresh cow's milk. Looking back now, Ekaterina can even chuckle about it when she remembers hiding amongst the calves with her siblings, on all fours to avoid detection. For my great-grandmother Magdalena, however, this must have been the most difficult time of her life, not least of all because of her husband's death in October 1945. He had lost his life in a car accident at the labour camp. Tens of thousands lost their lives in industrial accidents of this kind (see Eisfeld 1999, 133). Magdalena found out about it from a plain postcard and has never been able to visit his grave. Just 30 years old, Magdalena had been widowed and become the lone mother of three children. Not completely alone, though, luckily. Her older



Fig. 2 Magdalena Schweiger working as a milkmaid in the stable of a collective farm, Kazakhstan, ca. 1965 | Privately owned / photographer unknown

sister Philippina, who remained unmarried and childless, lived with Magdalena up to the end of her life in the 1980s and helped her raise the children.

► Fig. 3

After the end of the war in 1945, the Germans continued to be overseen by the commandant offices of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs as "persons of unequal legal status"⁸ without a right to move freely or choose where they live. Several years of forced labour threatened whoever left their allocated place without permission (see Eisfeld 1999, 136). Only Stalin's death in 1953 paved the way for an incremental improvement of their situation. The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet's decree of December 13th, 1955 finally

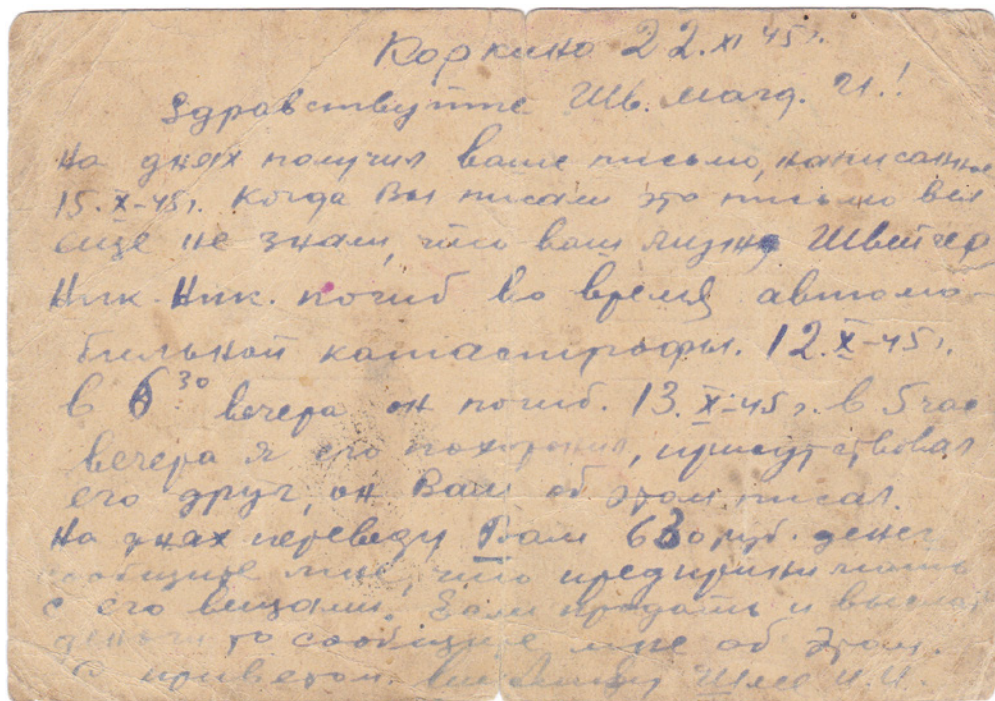


Fig. 3 Postcard dated November 22nd, 1945: Front, text on back: "Good day Schweiger Magdalena, I have recently received your letter dated 15/10/45. When you wrote this letter you were not yet aware that your husband Schweiger Nikolai lost his life in a car accident on 12/10/45. He died at 6:30 pm. I buried him on 13/10/45 at 5 p.m. A friend attended and has written to you about it. I will be sending you 630 roubles in the coming days. Let me know what I am supposed to do with his things. If I am meant to sell them and send you the money, just let me know. With kind regards, Iosif Schlee."⁷

ordered that the Germans and their relatives were to be released from the so-called special settlements, but were not entitled to return to their original settlement areas, or to a compensation for their seized assets. Corresponding opportunities having been limited under the command of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, particularly where university places are concerned, the German population's general level of education was significantly lower than that of the Russians and Kazakhs also living in Kazakhstan. As a national minority without territory in the realm of the USSR, the Germans were in a less favourable position than nationalities with their own union republics, and had to make do with German as a foreign language in school (see Dietz / Hilkes 1992, 36ff.). So while Magdalena herself had still attended a German School in the Crimea where all the subjects were taught in German, her children and grandchildren learned it as a second foreign language besides English, and only rarely as a native language subject. Despite the decree of August 29th, 1964, which assured the support of the union republics for the economic and cultural development of the German population, attempts to establish German-language cultural institutions and media remained rather timid, even if positive tendencies were to be detected (see Jahn 1969). The latter for example included the availability of a four-page German-language newspaper in a rather isolated northern Kazakh village such as Semiosjornoje, and the broadcasting of short German-language shows on the radio. Massive assimilation to the dominant Russian society in cultural and language terms became observable amongst the German community from the 1970s, at the latest. The traumatizing historic experiences of the expelled generation and fear of being stigmatized as fascist even in the post-war generations meant that the use and teaching of the German language were mostly restricted to one's own four walls. German descent was often disowned, even in official documents, by assuming the nationality of the respective non-German parent. Most of all worries about possible discrimination in the labour market led the younger generation to bank on learning Russian and nothing but. It is therefore no surprise that the language skills declined over time, from one generation to the next (see Dietz / Hilkes 1992, 48ff.). Even Magdalena, as a member of the older generation who preferred German to Russian in everyday life, faced the problem of being hardly able to write in the language any longer when she emigrated to Germany, not least of all because she spoke a dialect. She therefore attended a German language course with her daughter Ekaterina in preparation for their departure and most of all practiced writing her own name, what with all the applications to be signed.

Germany – the new homeland?

What could have persuaded 77-year-old Magdalena Schweiger to leave her current life behind and start from scratch in a new place once again, after all her experiences of displacement, deportation, expropriation and uprooting? Was

it the wish “to live amongst Germans ... as a German” (quoted from Schönhuth 2006, 372), attributable to a feeling of homelessness ever since the deportation? Or were it more pragmatic reasons given the break-up of the Soviet Union, attendant economic decline and growing ethnic tensions? And why opt for the Federal Republic of Germany, when it would have also been possible to emigrate to Russia or the Ukraine, and hence the former homelands, after all?⁹

The fight for national minority rights and struggle for territorial rehabilitation by restoring the former Volga Republic had already set in during the post-Stalin area of the 1960s. This wish was to remain unfulfilled, not least of all because the population living in the concerned area now opposed it – and that despite the USSR Presidential Decree of 1990, which recognised and rehabilitated the Germans in the Soviet Union as victims of politically motivated retribution measures, and despite the 1991 Law of the Russian Federation about the Rehabilitation of Repressed Peoples, which promised comprehensive compensation. The disappointment about this was great indeed amongst the Germans, who also felt increasingly threatened by the policies of the former Soviet Union’s still young successor states as a highly marginalized group compared to other ethnicities (see Krieger 2015a, 14). One of the first legal changes in the newly established Kazakhstan was the introduction of Kazakh as the primary official language and linking of leadership positions to ethnic origin. Knowledge of the Kazakh language now also became a requirement for any promising integration in the Kazakh labour market, which put the German population at a particular disadvantage in comparison with ethnic Kazakhs. Even the teaching in schools was to be in Kazakh only within a short period of time. What motivated the expelled generation to emigrate to Germany on the basis of the Federal Expellee Law as so-called late repatriates was therefore also their concern about the future of their children and grandchildren. One expected a better future for oneself here than in the successor states of Russia and Ukraine, which were also beset by economic problems. Another reason was the fact that the repatriation and immigration policy in Germany was becoming more restrictive since the end of the 1980s, triggering a “now or never” mentality amongst the Germans willing to emigrate.¹⁰ It is hence no coincidence that the number of German repatriates from Kazakhstan peaked in 1994 – the year after a migration policy programme had come into force that introduced so-called contingents.¹¹

Magdalena Schweiger relocated to Germany with her daughter Ekaterina on March 31, 1993. In contrast to the 1941 deportation, also referred to as a resettlement in official Soviet parlance, this step was taken of her own volition. As an already retired member of the expelled generation, she “... no longer needed to assert herself in the German meritocracy, fight for her place in competition with the natives, and most of all no longer had to fear another expulsion. At the end of her journey, she (has) arrived in the – even if often bewildering – homeland” (Schönhuth 2006, 373). Magdalena Schweiger died in October 2003 in Oldenburg, Lower Saxony, where she had continually lived after her arrival in Germany.

- 1 See Eisfeld 2003, 8f. <http://lmdr.de/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/blacksee.pdf> (accessed on 25/06/2016).
- 2 Id., 11. <http://lmdr.de/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/blacksee.pdf> (accessed on 25/06/2016).
- 3 If not indicated otherwise, all the information on the life of Magdalena Schweiger and background on the historical context is taken from the interview with her daughter Ekaterina O. dated May 06th 2016.
- 4 See Eisfeld 2003, 14. <http://lmdr.de/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/blacksee.pdf> (accessed on 25/06/2016).
- 5 The fate of the Black Sea Germans from the remaining parts of the Ukraine was different, depending on when the advancing German troops reached them after the attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941. The Dnieper River became a dividing line in this. The areas west of it were occupied so quickly by the Wehrmacht and Romanian troops that the German population could initially remain there, but was also evacuated westward later as the front moved in. The further east they were from the Dnieper River, the more systematic and complete would the deportation of the German population by the Soviets be (see Eisfeld 1999, 120).
- 6 See Krieger 2015b. <http://ome-lexikon.uni-oldenburg.de/laender/kasachstan/> (accessed on 25/06/2016).
- 7 Translation of the back of the pictured postcard from Russian.
- 8 Krieger 2015b. <http://ome-lexikon.uni-oldenburg.de/laender/kasachstan/> (accessed on 25/06/2016).
- 9 See Eisfeld 2003, 15f. <http://lmdr.de/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/blacksee.pdf> (accessed on 25/06/2016).
- 10 See Panagiotidis 2015. <http://ome-lexikon.uni-oldenburg.de/begriffe/aussiedlerspaet> (accessed on 25/06/2016).
- 11 See Krieger 2015b. <http://ome-lexikon.uni-oldenburg.de/laender/kasachstan/> (accessed on 25/06/2016).

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