

Oral history interview with Christian Koppenstein

RG-50.030.0957

Summary

- He was born in 1936 in Bessarabia, now Moldova
- Always a questionable jurisdiction as to who controlled this land
- When Ina asked who was controlling it at the time, he didn't know
- His world was his village and his family
- German village
- These Germans had been invited by Catherine The Great to settle parts in the East (east of German lands)
- His village is called Fundu Sarasika (SPELL CHECK)
- Born into a farm family
- Huge farm (600 hectares)
- His father purchased it, not inherited
- His grandfather (mother's side) was a blacksmith
- His grandfather (father's side) died when he was born
- Platt-Deutch (sp?) was the "low-German" that they spoke
- He has forgotten the language
- Lutheran Community
- Had a church but not a regular pastor
- He remembers farm/animals well
- His father was in three armies under three jurisdictions
 - What he called Russian Army (actually Soviet Army)
 - Romanian Army
 - German Army (when they moved to Poland)
 - Father fought at Normandy against the allies
- Christian said he father was not a military man
- For his father, his life was the farm
- He did not like any kind of military involvement, but he also wasn't a protester
- He went and did his duty
- When they were forced to leave Bessarabia, and the Gestapo told them if they don't leave they'll be sent to Siberia
- Evacuation, but forced
- Only could take what they could carry
- Transported by trucks into quarantined area in Poland
- Weren't allowed out of this quarantined area for 2 or 3 months

- Men and women were separated
- This is 1941 (he was 5 years old at the time)
- He is with his father, brother, and little sister who is born that year
- As a result of this quarantine, father is able to purchase another farm in Northern Poland
- Remembers passing a place that smelled terrible and had ashes spewing (location unknown)
- Farm they move into in Poland, they payed German authorities for the farm
- Later, someone comes to help work with them at the farm
- Young Polish girl, who actually lived on this farm before (maybe her family's farm)
 - Christian's parents knew this and still paid her despite it being illegal to do so
- His father was called up for army service
- They didn't know (at the time) where his father was sent
- When he came back from his first deployment, Christian's father had to wear his army uniform at all times and have his gun by his side
- During that week, they went to visit a neighbor
- Christian had started school with other ethnic Germans who had been displaced from elsewhere
- One of the boys in his school bragged that his father had a gun
- This was forbidden
- Christian told Ina he remembers at age five going back to help his father in Bessarabia, to bury the guns they had because it was illegal
- This boy had bragged that his father had a gun (neighbor of Christian)
- Christian and his father were visiting that neighbor one day when the SS drove up
- The SS officer asked the man (Christian's neighbor) if he had a gun, the man says no
- Then he asks him again, the man says "no, what would I need a gun for"
- Then the SS officer takes Christian's father's gun and shoots the neighbor dead in front of Christian, the father, the man's wife and his son
- Then the SS officer turns and says "you won't be needing a gun anymore"
- That gave Christian a sense of who the authorities were and how they acted
- CLASSROOM
 - Christian said 99% were German but there was Jewish boy who was his friend
 - Ina found it surprising that a Jew would be there
 - Christian said he wore a star
 - How could there be a Jewish boy with a star in an ethnically German class?
 - It turns out that the "myth" he speaks of was that only Jews wore the star
 - Christian said people could say anybody was a Jew and then people had to wear them

- It was a way of informing on others (even if they weren't actually Jewish)
- It was a way of wrongly accusing
- It was a way of keeping distrust, and getting revenge using the current rules
- It was an insight into what the relations must have been like, even among ethnic Germans
- His father leaves again from war
- No letters, they don't hear from father entire war
- Family has to flee again
- Mother on her own, they flee in January
- Roads full of people going Westwards
- He remembers barefoot people going eastward
 - These people guarded by soldiers
 - He believes these were death marches
- One woman who is middle aged puts her head under their wagon wheel and asks Christians mother to drive over her head
- She wants to die
- He remembers seeing a young boy breaking ranks and running into the snow trying to run away
- A soldier follows him, shoots him, and hears screams, sees blood
- As they go along the road, Christian sees lots of blood on the road
- They eventually join their maternal grandparents
- Sleeping in abandoned barn
- Crossed river that divides Poland and Germany
- Made it to the home of a woman (Western Germany)
- They help her around the house, she is alone
- They were told to go North of Berlin rather than South
- They reach a town under British control
- He sees British soldiers on a tank shoot something into the house that sets it on fire
- Everyone is in the house
- They have to run out quickly
- The animals don't make it from the barn, he hears them screaming as they're burnt alive
- The Brits are sitting on their tank laughing
- Christian has a number of such episodes where there is crossfire and such
- End of war comes
- By total coincidence, his father is in a POW camp that's not five miles away from where they ended up living
- A man living in that camp comes looking for his own family
 - Stops Christian on the road, asks if he knows a certain family

- Christian knows the son
- Christian asks the man about his father, and they find him
- His father is released, family reunited
- They never felt at home in Germany
- They felt like outcasts
- They were resented by local Germans because they were refugees consuming scarce commodities
- Resentment from Poles when they were in Poland
- They were Lutheran
- Through Lutheran organizations, they were able to be sponsored into the US
- They came in 1952 to Western US
- In the American West, there were a lot of people from Bessarabia
- There was a community of people to come to who had similar roots and a similar arc of a journey
- Here in the U.S. he was known as a DP