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Sad Pages of History

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Author's Note:
Sometimes even a short story told by its witnesses gives you better understanding of the event than reading about the same thing in a history textbook. And, what if that story covers a period of about twenty to thirty years and the events described there took place more than half a century ago? Is it not a real history of the passing of time?

At the beginning of the 1980s after my grandmother passed away, my grandfather, Karl Karlovich Shmidt, left Kazakhstan and lived with us until his death in 1987. I was lucky to have numerous heart-to-heart talks with him about how the Germans lived in the Volga region before they were evicted from there in 1941. Unfortunately, in his stories Grandfather avoided the topics of eviction and the labor army; too bad. Now there are only two of my relatives who can still tell us about those remote and tragic times. One of them is Arnold Petrovich Baster, my aunt's husband. He now lives in the city of Uralsk in the Republic of Kazakhstan. While visiting us in the fall of 2005, he was very kind to share his memories with me, and I wrote down his story. Aleksandr Spack, Srednyaya Ahtuba, November 2005

I

Uncle Arnold was born in the city of Marksshtadt[1] August 5, 1924. He spent most of his childhood at the *khutor* (village) Bosens Damm. The khutor was located in the steppe 40 kilometers away from Marksshtadt. According to the 1926 census, there were 23 households at the khutor, 116 people, 69 men and 47 women. The population was exclusively German. Nobody knows when the khutor came into existence, but according to Elizaveta Ivanovna Baster, Arnold Pertovich's mother, it was there when she was born in 1904. She was born at the same khutor and her maiden name was Nichelman. As to the name of the khutor, it is explained by the dam around which it was built. The German word Damm means dam, weir, or dike.

Arno, as Uncle Arnold was called when he was a child, lived at the khutor together with his mother and brother Victor, who was two years younger. During Soviet times and up to the eviction of the Germans from the Volga region there was a kolkhoz named after V. I. Lenin, at the khutor where Arno's mother worked as a simple *kolkhoznica*. His father, Petr Andreevich Baster, worked in the city of Marksshtadt as a worker at the factory named Krasnyi Tekstilshhik. He visited his family living at the khutor Bosens Damm from time to time, but being busy at the factory he spent most of his time in Marksshtadt.

Before the October Revolution of 1917 the Baster family lived in prosperity. Arnold Petrovich's grandfather, Andrei (Heinrich), owned a lot of residential and other buildings in Ekaterinenshtadt.

"A big house with a French roof, a barn, a stable—all those buildings were located on Bebel Street in Marksshtadt (Marx-stadt, Germany) and belonged to my grandfather", recalls Uncle Arnold. "In the 1920s during the dispossession of the kulaks, all Grandfather's property was taken away and the family was evicted from their own house. When, many years later in the 1970s I visited the city of Marks, I, of course, went to that street. Grandfather's house was still there and the outbuildings were well preserved, even though so many years had passed."

It is possible that because Uncle Arnold's father is descended from a wealthy family, that was a reason for his arrest in 1937.

"It was late fall of 1937", recalls Uncle Arnold. "My father came home from the city and was helping my mother with the house chores. One of the November days we, a few boys, were skating on the ice which had already set on the pond. Suddenly a next-door boy comes running to the pond and tells me: 'Arno, hurry to the khutor, say good-bye to your father, a militiaman came to take him away.'"

"I ran home. Father was already sitting on the cart. Mother was standing next to him and crying bitterly. Father told us good-bye. The red-haired *nkvdeshnik*[2] whipped the horse, and the cart was off."

It was the last time Uncle Arnold saw his father. Nobody knows what happened to him after that.

But, we are a little too far ahead in our story. In 1932 Uncle Arnold turned eight years old, and, as all Soviet children, he started school.

"As a first and a second grader I went to the school situated at our khutor," says Uncle Arnold. "Now I don't remember the name of my teacher, but I very well remember that in 1939 she was given an Order of Lenin for her teaching work."

In 1934 Uncle Arnold left for Marksshtadt to continue his education there.

"In Marksshtadt I attended a seven-year school in the Upper Town—Oberstadt in Germany",[3] explains Uncle Arnold, "and stayed with my mom's sister, Anna Ivanovna Kramer." She lived on Engelsa Street in house number 88. Now the street is named after V.I.Lenin. The school where I studied was located on Kirova Street. Not far from our school, in the outskirts of the city, there were orchards, and behind the orchards was a pond which we called Kavakaberg. During school breaks I always went to the khutor Bosens Damm to visit my mother and brother, but then returned to Marksshtadt to continue my studies."

"After I finished the fifth grade in 1937", Uncle Arnold continues his story, "I didn't go to the city, I started working at the kolkhoz at 'Stalinets' as a combine operator assistant. My father had been arrested and I had to help my mother to support my brother and me. In 1937 Victor was eleven years old, but I was already thirteen! So, I worked at the kolkhoz until we were evicted in 1941."

II

August 28, 1941, the day when the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR approved the decree "On the eviction of the Germans living in the Volga region", is a dark date in the history of Russian Germans. With a stroke of a pen lives of many thousands of Soviet Germans were changed, thousands were left without a roof over head, without any property, which, by the way, the thoughtful Soviet state still hasn't returned to its loyal citizens. So, the eviction began....

On September 13, 1941, all the residents of the khutor Bosens Damm were made to sit down on carts and taken to Marksshtadt. In Marksshtadt all the people and their belongings were loaded on a barge and sent to Saratov, a city on the Volga, from where their long trip to the east of the country began.[4]

"We were being carried in cattle cars, the cars that during the peace time were used to carry cattle," tells Uncle Arnold. "The people from khutor Bosens Damm were being transported in very few railway cars. In every car there were five to seven families. Nobody in our car died on the way, everybody got to station Biysk in Altaiskii Krai alright. We arrived there September 26, 1941. Only two times during our trip were we given some soup to eat, but we didn't eat it anyway. We were saved from death thanks to the food our mother had managed to take with us. Before departure, while still at home, we killed a pig. Mom roasted it in the oven, put the meat in buckets, and poured the grease over it. Prepared this way, the meat was well preserved during the entire trip. Besides, we had two sacks of flour. We slept on the feather bed, which mother, also by some miracle, was able to take with us. The carriage wasn't heated, but it wasn't cold. Sometimes it was even stuffy because of the high number of people, twenty to thirty in one carriage. We were not given water, so we made our own supplies when the train stopped at the stations."

"We arrived in Biysk at night. We thought that we would stay in the carriages until morning, but were told to get out. It was cold outside. We began to gather brushwood to make fires. So, we stayed in the open air, sitting around fires, until morning. In the morning we were put on carts and taken to different neighboring villages. Our family was taken to the village of Bochkary in Tselinnyi Region of Altaiskii Krai. Besides us, fifteen other families from khutor Bosens Damm ended up there: Shmidt, Luft, Rimer, Felenger, Karlin, Sabelfeld, Majer, and others."

"Village Bochkary was located 60 kilometers from Biysk. Our carts left Biysk in the morning, and we reached Bochkary in the evening. When we got there we were distributed among families of local residents. The settling went peacefully and quietly. I want to say that at first there were no collisions between us Germans and the local people. Only later when they began to receive news about their relatives killed in battles, they started to look sideways at us as if we were guilty of something. There were some who called us 'fascists', but on the whole everybody who knew us characterized us as hardworking, honest, and punctual."

"There were three collective farms in Bochkary: Sibiryak, Vperiod, and the collective farm named after Telman."

"On the Volga where we lived before, almost all agricultural work was mechanized. But, on the Altai where we were brought, crops were still cut with the help of horses and put away by hand. At the threshing floor where grain was taken, nothing was mechanized. There was manual labor everywhere. I was not accustomed to that."

"It was not easy to feel at home in a new place. It was not enough that all our belongings and the cattle were left on the Volga, also a language problem appeared. Most of the

Germans did not speak any Russian and at first it was very difficult for them to communicate with the locals. However, the authorities did not pay much attention at all those problems and people had to adapt to the situation somehow."

"From the very first day of our living there I worked at the collective farm", says Uncle Arnold. "About two months later I was sent to Burovlyanka, a timber industry farm, to lay in timber for the kolkhoz. It was the end of 1941. I was seventeen years old then."

"January 10, 1942, a resolution of the State Defense Committee #1123 'on mobilization of migrant Germans to labor columns' was passed. According to it, male Germans between ages 17 and 50, fit for physical work, were to be mobilized to labor columns for the duration of the war."

"After New Year's Day, military registration and enlistment offices started to take away German men and send them to the labor army—so, I found myself in Cotlas."

"You won't find the term 'labor army' (*Trudarmee*, in Russian) in official documents. This term, or *Arbeitsfront* in German, is used in historical literature and memoirs to refer to 'labor columns', which were in fact camouflaged concentration camps, GULAG, where German men and women were mobilized to, for the time of the war. The main purpose of the labor army was to compel the 'socially dangerous German contingent' to hard, unbearable labor."

III

"February 23, 1942, I got to the city of Cotlas, Arkhangelsk oblast, to build a bridge over the Northern Dvina. More than sixty years passed since then, but it is still terrifying to even think of that time."

"We worked twelve hours a day. The amount of food we were given depended on how much we did during the day. For example, if you fulfill the daily work quota you get 700 grams of rye bread and a tin pot of wishy-washy soup. We ate outside near the field kitchen. Some went to their barracks. It was freezing outside, 35-40 degrees C below zero! Not everyone could stand it. We carried our pots and spoons with us on our belts, all the time. Of course, we did not get all 700 grams of bread in one go. It was divided into three parts—breakfast, lunch, and supper. The rations we got were not the same size; nobody weighed them, they just cut a loaf of bread into pieces 'by eye', approximately 200-250 grams each. So we received a piece of bread and soup, which was kind of cloudy water, without a drop of fat in it. One was lucky if he got a piece of fish head, turnip, or rutabaga. It was all the food we had."

"When we arrived at Cotlas they didn't take us to the barracks at once. We had to stay in the train for two or three days. When we finally got to the barracks there was an awful stink there. It turned out that they had been used for storing potatoes. The smell of rot saturated not only the air but the walls too. It was a nightmare. The plank-beds in the barracks were arranged in three circles. It was freezing cold. There were stoves made of iron barrels in the barracks but they offered little help to protect us from cold. We slept fully dressed. They did not give us any work uniform, so we wore what we had on when we arrived there. In turns we took duty to watch the fire so that it wouldn't go out. In April 1942 the barracks were enclosed with a tall fence and barbed wire was drawn over it."

"The head of the camp was a German man, Yakobi. I worked in column five. Later, when I was transferred to Zheshart in Comi ASSR, where I got acquainted with my future father-in-law, Karl Karlovich Shmidt, I found out that he had also been in our camp in Cotlas, but he worked in column six and I did not know him at that time."

"I mainly worked with concrete. The bridge was built like this: a big ice-hole was cut out in the ice that covered the river and something resembling a huge metal barrel was lowered into it. Then water and wash were pumped out of the barrel and the empty space was filled with concrete. This is how piers for the future bridge were cast. The concrete needed for construction works was brought and poured into a big hole dug in the earth, and we had to carry it in carts to the river and pour it into the prepared casing. We had to do everything very fast so that the concrete wouldn't harden in the hole. Besides, it was winter and the weather was terribly cold, and the concrete literarily froze in the hole. A few people were burning fires around it to prevent the cement from freezing while we were carrying it to the river."

"People died like flies because of cold and hunger. The bodies of the dead were piled right there in the camp and then were put on a sled and a tractor took them somewhere away to bury in a common grave. Once the tractor that was carrying the sled with the bodies broke down on the way and the sled was left in the forest. In spring a team of workers from our camp working in the forest came across that sled. There was awful stink around. It was a dreadful picture."

"Almost all the men from our khutor Bosens Damm were in the same camp as me. I had good, friendly relations with one of them, Karl Sabelfeld. Karl lived in the next barrack and I often visited him after work. Soon my friend got so emaciated that he couldn't get up off his bed. Once, when I came to see him, he gave me a small bundle and said: 'There are some

clothes and a little bread here, take it.' I did not know what to do. 'Come on, take it, I won't need it anyway, and somebody else here will get it.' I think he knew that he would not live long and decided to make arrangements in regard to his meager belongings beforehand. He died the next day. Many years later, when I saw Karl Sabelfeld's wife in the Altai, I did not have enough courage to tell her this story."

"By the end of April, 1942, the construction of the bridge over the Northern Dvina was finished. On May 1, 1942, there was a celebration of the railroad bridge opening. A brass band was playing and a steam engine pulled three carriages on the bridge. The authorities were very happy. The bridge was put into operation on the public holiday of the first of May—the Day of solidarity of working people. The engine driver who drove the engine during the opening ceremony—an ordinary convict and Russian by nationality—got a ten year reduction of his imprisonment time and sent to the battle front. The authorities considered it the highest award for a prisoner. But, he wasn't very happy to get such an award. At the front he could be killed, while in the camp he was at least protected from that. Ordinary convicts lived in better conditions than Germans in the 'labor army.' They also received better food and warm clothes."

"I don't know how I survived in that hell. I guess being young helped a lot; I was seventeen at that time. Many did not make it. I can't tell you about everybody, but see for yourselves—when we were brought to Cotlas in February 1942, there were 16 thousand people in the camp. By May 1, 1942, there were no more than 5 thousand left!"

"After the bridge was put into operation, a commission came to the camp. It looked like the supreme authorities of the GULAG were terrified by such a high level of mortality there. After the investigation many construction and camp authorities were replaced. At the same time there was a commission working in the camp that verified the capacity to work of those who were still alive. I was so emaciated by that time that I could hardly walk. Hoping to be considered disabled and sent home I went to the commission. But, they said that I was still young and could work, and determined my level of disability at 50 percent and sent me to another camp situated 15 kilometers away from Cotlas to build a railroad. I felt worse and worse. My hair began to come out. I could hardly move."

"There was a doctor in the camp, a Jew by nationality. He paid no attention at those who were half dead such as me. One day another doctor came to inspect our camp. I decided to try my luck again and dragged my feet to the dispensary. When I entered the office and saw the new doctor I recognized him at once. It was a German called Shpomer from Marksshtadt and I had known him when we lived on the Volga. When our camp doctor got out of the office, I seized the opportunity and talked to Shpomer in German. I told him that I couldn't work any more; I didn't have any strength left. Not that it was necessary to explain—it was evident that I wouldn't live much longer, and I would not if it were not for Shpomer."

"I was sent to the infirmary in Cotlas. The patients there were under guard and couldn't go anywhere. True, we were allowed to send letters, and those who could write (many were illiterate) corresponded with their relatives. As now I remember the line from my letter that I wrote to my mother then: '*Liebe teure Mutter! Schicke mir die Posylke*'[5] She did send me a parcel, where, among other things, there was a small bag of tobacco. That tobacco, I can say, saved my life. In the hospital ward where I was being treated there were a few other men. They were ready to give me their rations for a pinch of snuff. Not everybody in the infirmary recovered. Many were so emaciated that they could not leave their hospital beds. I turned out to be the strongest. Every morning I walked around the ward and put a pinch of tobacco on the chest of my fellow sufferers who were not strong enough to get up."

"In the hospital I got lucky again. When I recovered and was to be sent back to the camp, a doctor took me aside during one of the rounds and said, 'I will continue to diagnose you as sick and too weak and you will work in the infirmary kitchen.' So I stayed in the infirmary until the spring of 1943. At night I helped the cook in the kitchen and during the day, took care of the patients in the ward."

"Talking to the cook, I found out that he was also a German from Marksshtadt; his name was Sabelfeld. After I made myself more or less familiar with the situation I started to notice that Sabelfeld disappeared from the kitchen every night for thirty or forty minutes. I asked him about it and, since we were in good relations, he confessed that he secretly visited his family that lived close to the infirmary."

"Spring of 1943 came. They could not keep me in the hospital any longer; I was considered fully recovered and capable to work. The distribution commission sent me to Zheshart in Comi ASSR."

IV

"In spring 1944 I arrived at the camp in Zheshart, Ust-Vymskiy region, in Comi ASSR. The barracks where members of the labor army lived were surrounded by barbed wire. We cut

timber. When we went to work outside the camp, there were no guards with us. But, before we left the territory of the camp we were counted and were allowed back to the camp only after all those who left the territory in the morning gathered near the gate in the evening. We worked twelve hours a day with no weekends or days off. In the barracks we slept on plank beds arranged in one circle. There were real stoves there with a range on the top. In that camp the amount of food we received also depended on how well we worked. Those who fulfilled the norm got 900 grams of rye bread and some wishy-washy soup which was not different from what they gave us in Cotlas. But, we ate in a special building—a dining room. As for lunch, it was brought to the lots where we worked. We did not receive any clothes and wore what we had. The footwear was so worn-out that many walked almost barefoot. Somebody found a way to make shoes, so called *chuni*, of raw horse hides. We had to sleep in them because, if we wanted to take them off and leave them on the floor, in the morning we wouldn't find them—rats would take them away and eat them. And, how many bedbugs there were there—just terrible! They literarily ate us up and there was no way to protect ourselves from them."

"People in the Zheshar camp didn't die in such large numbers as in Cotlas. One could feel that the situation was changing little by little. At the end of 1944 the fence around the barracks and the guards were removed, and we all went under the power of the commandant.[6] We still lived in the barracks and worked but once a month we had to register ourselves at the commandant's office. Without his permission we couldn't go even to a neighboring village. At the same time we received some clothes—for the first time during my stay in the labor army. Those were secondhand military uniforms, sheepskin coats, and *valenki*. And, at the end of 1944 we all received new American boots. Many of my fellows gave the boots to the locals in exchange for food. I also exchanged my new American boots for some potatoes."

"I should say that we knew nothing about what was happening in the country and at the front, or where that front was. We lived in complete ignorance. The only thing we could do was work, work, and work. But, one day, May 9, 1945, we woke up in the morning to the sounds of the brass band playing near the dining room. Nobody could understand what was happening. We were taken outside, lined up, and told that the war was over. On that occasion we were given a day off and a double ration of rye bread. The next day everything was as usual—work, 900 grams of bread, and some soup. Many of us were happy that the war was over and we were already making plans on how we would go to our families, and then back home to the Volga. But, older men said, "Wait, it's too early to make plans. They will keep us here for another ten years."

"And so it happened. We stayed under the dominion of the commandant for another ten years until the end of 1955 when, at the time of Khrushchev, special settlements were abolished."

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After the end of the war in 1945, already living in special settlements, many ex labor army members began to invite their families to where they lived and worked. It also became possible to create new families. In 1951 Arnold Petrovich got married to Emma Karlovna Shmidt, who, together with her brother and younger sister, had come to Comi ASSR to stay with her parents. In 1952 Aunt Emma and Uncle Arnold had a baby girl, Lidiya.

In March 1953 Joseph Stalin died. It was the beginning of the era of changes, but the decree "on legal status of those living in special settlements" was still in force. In spring 1954, on a special permission of the commandant, Uncle Arnold was at last able to go to the Altai and, after twelve years, see again his mother and younger brother who lived in Bochkary, where they were forced to move in 1941 after their eviction from the Volga.

December 13, 1955, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR approved the decree "on lifting restrictions on legal status of Germans and members of their families living in special settlements." Special settlements were abolished but people were not allowed to go back to their native places. Article 2 of the decree said: "Lifting restrictions on Germans in special settlements does not mean returning to them their property confiscated during eviction, nor do they have a right to return to the places where they were evicted from." The tragedy of the German people was on going.

In March 1956, after special settlements were abolished, Uncle Arnold and his family moved to Valuevskaya experimental land-improvement station in Staropoltavskiy district of the Volgograd region, and a little later—to the settlement Posevnoi in the same region. Since 1967 Uncle Arnold and Aunt Emma have been living in the city of Uralsk (Kazakhstan Republic).

Footnotes:

1. Ekaterinenshtadt (Baronsk); on June 4, 1991 was renamed Marksshtadt according to a decree of III Congress of Soviets of the German colonists of the Volga region; (after liquidation of the ASSR of the Volga Germans in August

1941 was renamed Marks of the Saratov Region) was founded on August 1766 by Baron Boregar (Beauregard). From May 1919 until June 1922 it was an administrative center of the Labor commune (Autonomic region) of the Volga Germans

2. Nkvdeshnik –slang for an official of NKVD,. militiaman

3. The city of Marksshtadt (Ekaterinenshtadt) was conventionally divided into two parts—Upper town (Oberstadt) and Lower town (Understadt)

4. It looks like Uncle Arnold is making a mistake here. Most likely the dispatch was made from the Pokrovsk station (city of Engels). According to the dates of departure and arrival to the final station of Biysk, it was train #886 that left the Pokrovsk station September 15, 1941, and arrived at the Biysk station September 26, 1941, that corresponds to my uncle's recollections.

5. "Dear, beloved mother! Send me a parcel!" (a mixture of German and Russian)

6. Legal status of special settlements was determined by the resolution of the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR of January 8, 1945, "On legal status of those living in special settlements." According to that resolution, everybody living in special settlements and able to work had to be involved in "socially useful labor" and did not have a right to "leave the limits of the settlement served by a given commandant's office without a special permission of the commandant."

Translator's notes:

Khutor - separated farm, typical for southern regions of the USSR at that time. (Before the October Revolution of 1917 those *khutors* were privately owned farms, and they usually belonged to relatively wealthy farmers. Those who were not rich lived in villages (*derevnya* in Russia, *selo* or *stanitsa* in Ukraine), with many individually owned houses. Gradually some of the khutors grew bigger, sometimes there were many families living there, but they still retained the name, khutor, because they were somewhat separated from the other farms and privately owned. After the revolution, however, property of the rich was expropriated and collective farms were organized where there used to be private farms. Still, many retained the name khutor. As I wrote, the word is typical for southern regions of Russia, and especially for Ukraine.)

Kolkhoz - collective farm

Kolkhoznica - collective farmer

"Krasnyi Tekstilshhik" – "Red Textile Worker"

Kulak - wealthy farmer exploiting somebody else's labor

Militiaman – policeman

NKVD – People's Comissariat of Internal Affairs

Order of Lenin - one of the highest governmental awards of that time

"Stalinets" – named after Stalin, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR at that time

GULAG – Main Correction—Labor Camps Administration, 1930-1960

ASSR – Autonomic Soviet Socialist Republic, a part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic at that time

Valenki – a kind of felt boots