

06/21/19 Herr Engelmann Interview Transcript

Frank Engelmann's family were Donauschwaben, ethnic Germans, who had lived in Novoselo, in the state of Batschka, Yugoslavia, since 1683. He was born in Augsburg, Germany. His father was a POW in Germany; he spoke six languages and was able to use his authority as a valuable translator to send for his wife and bring her to Germany, where he had an apartment. This is where Frank was born. Frank Engelmann spent many years in three concentration camps run by the Partisans in Yugoslavia before he and his family were finally able to escape and come to America.

After attending school in America, Frank Engelmann spent thirty-two years teaching German and English at Kent Roosevelt High School. He also wrote a book about his and his family's experiences in the camps, Blondes: Allied Atrocities of World War II. He is now retired and lives in Kent, Ohio.

Engelmann: Now the first question I can't answer because I was not alive before the war. I can tell you about the tensions though, because after World War I the Slavs had carte blanche as far as atrocities and, and crimes against our [ethnic German] people. They [the Slavs] were jealous of what we had because we worked and they didn't, and so we owned everything because we were there first and they came later. Just like in any city in the US, you got the people that have nothing that come into town and they want to be treated like they don't have to work. That's the situation we had there, and it was worse during the harvest time when these landless Slavs would show up and just go through the orchards or through the fields and steal and do whatever. They also committed major crimes against our people, who would go to the magistrate in the city and complain and file a report. Nothing ever happened to the perpetrators. And they kept saying "we're gonna get you we're gonna get what's yours." That's something similar we hear right here in this country and that's what actually happened.

So, number three. When the Partisans attacked, I was too young to know what was going on. The first camp we were put in was Jarek, and I remember nothing because I was too young. And the furthest back I can remember was the third camp. The second camp was vague. The first camp was Jarek, from which they [the Partisans] moved us to Gakovo. They closed the Jarek camp because they brought in all the homeless teenagers and preteens to make them communists. They weren't allowed to speak their language [German]. They had to only speak Serbo-Croatian, and they tried to make them Communists, to lose their national identity. So that's why that camp was cleared out it was mainly just for them. Gakovo, the second camp, was just to get rid of more of us. And as people died off, more were brought in from outside from other camps that they had retaken. Because quite a few people escaped and went back to their homes, and then they were caught again and brought back.

And we escaped from Gakovo, and we were caught and brought to the third camp, Krushievl. It was smaller, a camp just for the hard cases, for people like us who knew how to abscond, I guess. Grandma would sneak out at night. She was fluent in Hungarian, and she picked out the Hungarian farms around us, around the camp. They [the Hungarians] were always generous to us and gave us food. And then she'd sneak back in and get beat up sometimes for bringing stuff in. But she was able to get word out to our relatives in America, and they sent stuff to that Hungarian farm, and we also got money and other things [like clothing]. And eventually we were able to bribe the head honcho to let us out. And he furnished a troop of guards that took

us to the Hungarian border which wasn't far away. And she gave him the money and they didn't shoot us or anything, they just let us go.

So coming to America, of course I was sick as a dog on the transatlantic voyage. The troop transporter was called General Langfitt. And we happened to come through during Lent when it was the worst weather in the North Atlantic. We had 100 foot waves, and the boat would go up and then down and go down so far the back end would lift up out of the water, and the propellers went “bum-bum-bum-bum,” like that. Everybody was sick. I threw up ten times in one day. I didn't get dehydrated because luckily, I found where they kept the Coke machines. You could get a Coke [for free], but that's why I hate Coke nowadays ‘cause I would drink it and then throw it up. So no Coke products for me at all. And on the voyage over I think I only had one good meal. When it calmed down I had vegetable soup, which was kind of spicy, and I was only able to get one bowl, and I wanted more, but there wasn't any more.

But the boat didn't only go this way (motioning up and down). It also went sideways. When they had a movie going and the boat went sideways all the chairs would go “WHAM!” [They would smash into the wall with people on them.] And then when it righted itself up the chairs would slide back. People had suitcases underneath the bunks. The bunks were military where you had two, four, six, in a row like that (indicating tiers/bunked beds). And whenever the boat leaned all the suitcases would go “wham,” and then back the other way “wham.” We put up with that for hours, so if you didn't have good baggage then stuff would just open up and fly all over the place. My poor mom and sister were up front, up at the bow, and that was the worst because that went up and down the most. The men were kind of in the middle so we had it a little better.

And I don't know how much weight I lost, but I know I did, when we got New York, New York Harbor. When we started out in in Bremen, the SS United States, that was the flagship of the Atlantic at the time, the fastest ship, it was being loaded, or it just came in to be loaded, and we were leaving. It actually passed us somewhere in the mid-Atlantic and it was empty and docked already when we got to New York. So our passage was eight days, and the SS United States made it in five or six days, I don't know which.

So we got to the immigration and the first thing that really made me aware about the prejudice against anyone from Germany happened. They looked at all our stuff. I was allowed to bring my accordion, and it said “Hohner” on the machine and “made in Germany.” And that [immigration] bastard ripped off the “made in Germany” sign. That was the first negative thing I experienced when I got here. And the other thing I noticed when going by train to Youngstown, the telephone poles were crooked because they were made out of wood. The ones in Europe are made out of concrete. They don't have the wood to spare, and so they're all straight and in line. That's the first thing I noticed. And then, when we got off the train, I noticed the squashed chewing gum all over the sidewalks, which you don't have over there [in Germany]. What I noticed about American GIs: they were all chewing gum when we were over there. And, actually I'd never met a black person. One came once to our, our swimming pool in town, the municipal swimming pool, and everybody stopped and looked at him because we'd never seen a black person.

But it was nice too, to be settled in. Grandma met us at the train station with a friend who had a car. And, quite a big car. I was amazed at the size of it. It was March, Ash Wednesday, when we arrived. And she [Grandma] had turned down the local TV station, they were gonna

come and interview us and video us, and she said “no,” so we weren't on TV, which was okay. We got to the house, her house, and I learned English by watching TV. I had had a half a year English at the German *Gymnasium*, they called it, which was equivalent to our high school. But they start earlier there. After third grade you have to take a test. If you don't pass it you don't get to go to high school; you go to trade school or technical school or whatever. So I passed it. We had English and German in the same year and French. So in six months I learned quite a bit. And then [here] I watched TV. Grandma kept us home for two weeks, so we would just watch TV and learn English.

Then we got to go to Catholic elementary school. It was called St. Joseph's. And the funny thing was, [the nuns] didn't test us or anything. Believe it or not - I couldn't even fit in the chairs - they put me and my brother in first grade. My sister was lagging behind; she stayed in first grade. But they put my brother and me in first grade, second day in second, third day in third, and so on up the ladder, and then 5th 6th 7th 8th grade. I got into math class. That was about the 8th day I guess. And they were doing math, just rote math, multiplication subtraction. And they asked me to go solve a problem on the board. I didn't work it out, I just put the answers from my head, and then this one kid was kind of jealous. He says, “what kind of math did you do?” So I put an algebra problem on the board and they go “huh?” and they asked the nun “is that correct? Does x equal 5?” and she goes “yeah.” One nun had problems with square roots so I had to go teach her class how to do square roots. So that was a bit of satisfaction. That's what kind of turned me on the path of being an educator because I enjoyed teaching math, I guess. Or just anything.

[At the immigration bureau, my parents were told they] were not allowed to talk about our experiences in the camps. They were told to keep their mouths shut and turn the other cheek. That's one reason you didn't hear about it, and it was never in the papers, and no books written etc. Although now I, see, I gave you a bunch of books that have been written since. So it's about time it was publicized. And I just recently found in one of my researches a book by James Bacque called *Crimes and Mercies*. He went to Moscow, looked into the archives, and he found that the Poles ran a total of over 1200 camps where they tried to kill off the German teens and preteens. They starved them, tortured them every day, gave beatings, and that's totally hidden from all news or any publication. He [Bacque] is the first one, a French-Canadian, who researched it and actually was able to print it. So they [the Poles] are responsible for millions of dead in Poland alone, and we have, not even a monument over here, nothing. Because they told us to keep quiet. But I didn't promise [to keep quiet]. That's why I keep giving lectures and talking about it.

Okay that's what it was like coming to America. I had to experience the high school life which was all kind of strange, but it went by so fast. I just didn't realize all the things that were involved. Not just school, but also social stuff, which they don't do over there [in Germany]. You don't have football teams, you don't have pep rallies. You've got sports, but they are outside of school. You have to join a club, where here all those different sports are available. Our exchange students think our high school here in town is a sports high school. And I said no, it's not, it's voluntary, you want to join a team, you can join a team. And they recruited me for the St. Joseph's Elementary track team. And I was the fastest runner in school, because I played soccer over there [in Germany], and I was in good shape. I could outrun everyone. And then at the city tournament I beat the black kids too in sprints. It was funny, I won the hundred yard dash and they come running up to the black kid “what happened, what happened did you get hurt?” because I beat him. And when I went to high school they tried to recruit me for football, but they didn't explain it to me. All I saw was a pile of bodies just piling on top of each other and trying to... I thought it

was called “fight ball” cause you fought over the ball. And that's not how it was, just nobody explained it to me, so I didn't play. In fact, I went to the German-Hungarian parish down the street from where we lived, and the priest gave me shoes, and I played with the Hungarian soccer team, which had won the state championship of all the ethnic clubs in the state because all of them had just come over from the '56 revolution, and so they were all top fit, and they all knew how to play. That's why I ended up starting soccer in Kent here. They call me the father of soccer. I was the only one on the faculty that could play and I recruited kids, and we had good teams.

Okay now what do you want to know about the Donauschwaben?

Ilyana: Could you talk to me about like the traditions that are still around versus the ones that may have faded away and stuff like that from the heritage?

Engelmann: Well at the club we have Kirweih, which was a holiday. Whenever the church was built that was a date that was observed every year thereafter. It's called blessing of the church. That's what Kirweih means. It's celebrated every year. In fact, it's happening this Sunday. They have a Mass and a procession around the lake. And then they choose Kirweih boy and Kirweih girl, the two that have been the most exemplary personalities, I guess. Do you belong to the dance group?

Ilyana: Yeah, I'm in the Youth Group.

Engelmann: Okay, well you know about Kirweih. Are you gonna be in it this weekend then?

Ilyana: I'll be watching it.

Engelmann: Oh you're not in it, okay. What, what level are you? I mean is that the teenagers? Okay my granddaughter Maddy was in it for a long time and she's now with the adult group.

But as far as that goes, we, we celebrate Easter and Christmas like everybody else does. It was no different back home. And Christmas, though, Saint Nicholas comes and gives the presents. In this, in this country, they don't call him Saint, they call him just Saint Nick, what do they call him here?

Ilyana: Santa Claus

Engelmann: Oh, yeah take the church away from it and make him non secular. Where in our tradition, it's the Christ child that brings the presents. And of course there was the tree. And then the Sternsinger, where a couple of kids would go around dressed as the three wise men, and they have a star on one of the poles, and they go around through the different houses and sing songs. And then people would throw cookies and candy at them. Of course we don't do that here anymore. I guess we have something similar called Halloween, where they get candy, but it has nothing to do with the religion. Our traditions are mostly religion-based. And here it's non-religious. I don't know, they concocted different things. So, the only one really, I just remember was the Kirweih. Nothing else. 'Course the Easter Bunny, that came from Germany. Osterhaas, where we hide the eggs and kids go around chasing to find them. We had something similar there. So that was actually non-religious. That was just celebrating coming of spring, is what that was.

And number six. I don't think people know about the Donauschwaben at all. Because like I gave you that publication, it's a moot subject. It's swept under the rug. Nobody wants to hear about it. “Well you were the enemy.” I say, This was after the war. We weren't the enemy to start

with. We didn't want any part of the war. In fact, when the German army came in, our men went and hid. And then the army would round up all the family members and threatened to shoot them if the men didn't show up and volunteer into the army. That's what happened with my uncles. My dad was a prisoner of war because he had been recruited into the Yugoslav Army when it [the war] started, so he was shipped to Augsburg to work in the Messerschmitt aircraft factory.

Well whenever I get a chance, I talk about it. But it's hard to reflect on, because it was all bad, all bad stuff, and your mind tries to erase the bad things. I know I saw hundreds of bodies and... but it's blotted out of my mind. I just remember eating when Grandma came in and stole stuff, and she brought it back to camp. And I begged my aunt a hundred times for a piece of bread. That's in my book. I'm sure you read it. I remember those times but not the bad times, no. I imagine that's how it is with every survivor. And I try to tell that to people I meet.

At the root of it was the Austrian Emperor. He, he was too liberal. He allowed all these ethnic groups to keep their own languages. German was the language that was used in everyday life, in publications and schools and he let them keep their own languages. So he ruled an empire of 60 different ethnic languages. And then in turn, the Hungarians demanded that their heritage be recognized and he didn't counter it. They demanded that all the German speakers within their borders, had to turn into Hungarians, and they had to change their names. They had to speak Hungarian, etc. If you didn't do that, you couldn't vote, you couldn't own land, you weren't a citizen. So he let them do that. So 75% of the Hungarians are actually of German descent. So if you go to any of our clubs, there are people with Hungarian names and they are translated directly from - the other way around, I'm sorry, Hungarian names which can be translated back into German. And they are close knit though, Germans, or German-Hungarians are usually considered the same ethnic group. And they got a big chunk of their land taken, and it's part of Romania now.

Our people are spread out throughout the world. We're in Australia, South America. One place in South America, in Argentina, is called Entre Rios, Between the Rivers. And it's the same thing. The villages have the same look, the same layout, everything. It's like they were transplanted from there to there. They're in Australia. And of course in the United States every big city has a German club or two or three. So we keep connected with our heritage by exchanging dance groups, visiting each other, having a central publication for all of us.

Ilyana: Do you think the clubs are staying as strong as they used to be?

Engelmann: Well, it's not as ethnic as it used to be. It's, it's more liberal now, and they're allowing so many non-German speakers to come in, and so everything is in English. Which is par for the course. All the, all the business transactions and the social events, it's all English now. Only the old-timers like me, we'll go there and speak German and sing the songs, but the young people don't. I used to teach [German at the club]. I was the first German teacher they had back in '65, and I didn't want any money. I said I'll do it for free. So we did it a couple of years, and then they dropped it for some reason, I don't know why. And then they started up again in the, in the 90s and it lasted about a year. So they're not keeping up with the language. That's the one thing that's the basis of the club, the language, and they should continue that more than anything. And it doesn't have to be the Donauschwaben theme, but it should be reflecting the German heritage, really. That's all.

Anything else?

Ilyana: Is there anything else that you want to add?

Engelmann: I have mentioned it at a speech when we had German American day. And I said what unites us is the language, and we should keep it up. And then they taught it, they had it going for a while, and then they stopped it again. So I don't know. I think the language learning should be available. I had kids from five years old up to high school in my classes, and I know two of them have PhDs in German now, and a couple of them are teachers, German teachers. So somehow I did have an influence on it, but not enough.

This transcript has been edited for clarity.