

4/15/18 Frau Koenig Interview Transcript

Anna Koenig lived in a small town in Yugoslavia until she was eight years old. When World War II ended, she and her family fled to Austria due to the ethnic cleansing of ethnic Germans living in Yugoslavia after the war. Soon they were told it was safe to return home to Yugoslavia.

Unfortunately this was not the case, and she and her family were put into concentration camps for the next three and a half years. After they were released from the camps, they returned home. Years later, when she met her husband at the age of nineteen, they decided to move to America, and Frau Koenig has lived in Akron, Ohio ever since.

Koenig: Wer sind die Donauschwaben. Who are the Donauschwabes. And then it says, “Im Auf und Ab der Jahre.” It was up and down for the Donauschwaben. Up and down in life.

Ilyana: Can you tell me what life was like for you before the war?

Koenig: I was only eight years old, living in Yugoslavia in a small town. Our ancestry goes then back already my great-grandmother was already born in that same town so it goes back probably almost two hundred years.

Ilyana: In the interview you shared with me previously, you said that your family ended up being separated from your father during the war. How did that end up happening?

Koenig: That was because... We wanted to go back home to save our house and our land and – Well first of all, let me go that way. We had to leave our homeland, our hometown, because the partisans, the communists, after the war stopped, we Germans that were still there, they wanted to kill us. We had to leave. We had to leave. And so, we went on horse and buggy. My aunt with two children, my mom with four children, and my grandmother and my aunt and my mom on one wagon. Whatever we could put on a covered wagon. And left. So did everybody else. Whoever didn't have horses and a buggy, they were shipped by train. And they went to what used to be East Germany. They took them over there. And we traveled through Hungary and into Austria. And the Austrian people had to take us in because we were homeless. So, they took us in, a farmer, and nine months into that, while we were living there, the Russians came by and said to us, “Go back home. Everything is ok back home.” And that's all what my grandmother wanted to hear, “everything is fine.” So, we took ox and a wagon, a flat wagon, put us on there, and we traveled back home, from Austria to Yugoslavia. So as we came to the border of Austria and Yugoslavia, they took everything away but what we had on and put us in concentration camp for three and a half years. And then we went from one camp to the other.

Everybody has a different situation, but my situation was that we went from one to the other. Sometimes we had to walk. Sometimes they put us on a train. And we're there for seven, eight months, and then again someplace else.

So, the last camp that we were in, a lot of people died. And we were very lucky that none of my family died. We were the first barrack. We were all on barracks on wooden floors, wooden bunk beds. Just the cover, nothing else. Just plain wood. And we were full of lice. We were undernourished. We didn't got much food. In the mornings, we might have gotten lukewarm water. And what they tried to do, not kill us by gun, but kill us by starvation. And a lot of people

got sick, were very ill. So was I. I had, I had every sickness you can imagine. I had typhus. I had cholera. I had everything that a person gets when you don't have nourishment. So, they took me and a few other girls out of the camp into a farmer's barn and put us on the straw in a barn, and we were lying there for two weeks. And then they took us back. And when I got back, my mom had to learn how to walk. She was so sick that she couldn't walk anymore. And then she said, "Come here, child." And I sat on the floor and she looked at my head and she went like this (runs fingers through hair), and I was full of lice. I didn't even know. And she went and took all my hair off. The hair was just dead.

And, so, it took a few more months, and then Truman, President Truman was President at that time, and he got wind of it, from some of our people from Austria who already came here to this country. And he got wind of it and put pressure on Tito, Marshall Tito was the president of Yugoslavia, he put pressure on him to release everybody. And that's how we got back home to our hometown.

And then we tried to find where my father was. My father was in the war, and he was captured by the Americans, and he was in Bavaria. So, we united with my father in 1950. And, so, this is how that started.

Ilyana: So, your father had been in the army when the Americans captured him?

Koenig: Yes, but it was just, nothing, it was, they had to do what they had to do. It was just the war. My father was also in the Croatian War. We had dual citizenship. We were Germans and Yugoslavian because my father and his mother were already born in Yugoslavia. But they immigrated from Austria and Germany. That was the Donauschwaben.

How that all started is, they had three groups. In the late 1700s, the first ones went because it was all populated. Germany and Austria had too many people. They didn't know what to do with them. So, Kaiser Franz Josef, if you know what I'm talking about, he said to some people, to whoever wanted it, 'go over there. I give everybody so much land, and you can settle down there.' So, a lot of them did. And they left in, it was called, the Ulmer schachtel, which they put together, a wooden box, and so many people would fit in there and went on the Danube, and they landed where ever they wanted to.

But that was very bad land, it was like a jungle, so to speak. And those people had absolutely nothing to work with. They made all their stuff with whatever they found. There is not another nation, another country as hardworking people as the Donauschwaben. The saying was, 'You can take everything away today from the Donauschwabe. Tomorrow, he has it back.' Because they were very, very ambitious.

Like I say, it was up and down up and down the jahre, the years went up and down, it was a very struggle for those people. And then they built cities, they built churches, they built beautiful countries, homes, towns, picture perfect. And then they had to leave that. They had to leave there when they started immigrating to Yugoslavia. And then they had to leave that, what they had there, and then they settled in Austria or Germany. They left that and came over here. So, it was up and down the years was what I meant to say.

Ilyana: So, how did you end up in America?

Koenig: Actually, my family, when we came out, my mom and my three brothers, we also wanted to go because my father's three sisters and a brother were already here. One was in Canada, a sister and a brother in California, and one sister of my dad's was here in Akron. And he also wanted to leave to better your life, ok? And so we went to the American consul, and this and that. And then they stopped the immigration. They stopped it because the quota was full, and they couldn't take any more. So, that's it. So, then my folks got a nice apartment. They bought their furniture. And so, they said, 'that's it.' A year later, a letter came and said if we wanna go, we can. And so my folks said, "should we leave everything, now, what we got, and y'know," and they decided not to go.

And then, when I was nineteen, I met my husband, and he was a coal miner in Germany. He was a true German. He said, "how would it be if we go to America?" I said, "Oh well I can ask my aunt." I asked my aunt here, and she went to Father Wolf at St. Bernard's Church. It was a German, well, you know everything about that?

Anyway, he took anyone that came from our people that needed a signature that they had a job and a place to live, he signed it. And, so, anyone that came, came through St. Bernard's, so to speak, it was a German Catholic refuge center, whatever you want to call it.

And in six months, my husband and I were here. We were not even married yet, and my aunt had already made papers that said we were married, so bang, bang we got married over there, and in no time, we were here. So, this is how I wound up here.

And my brother that's here, he, the one that's two years younger than I am, he came a year before and he went to California. And then he found out we were here, and he came and stayed with me till he got married. That's how I got here.

Ilyana: So, in my research, I noticed that there's not a lot of people who know about the expulsion of the Donauschwabens. How do you feel about that? Do you wish more people knew?

Koenig: The reason, I don't know, because we Donauschwaben, when we started to get the culture going, and started to do everything the way, culture life, we didn't have the money to pay somebody to put that on the big bell, so to speak.

There are millions and millions of our Donauschwaben that are dead because of the war. And we have people, when we left our homeland, we got scattered all over the world. We have 'em in Brazil, we have 'em in Australia, we have Argentinian, we have 'em. Every continent on this Earth, you will find Donauschwaben. And they're very hard-working people. Like I said, I don't think there is another breed of people that will be, in my opinion, the best workers and the best people you can find.

Ilyana: So, the camps you were in, those were run by Tito and the Partisans?

Koenig: Oh, yeah, by Communism, yeah, yeah. And always behind barbed wire. We were wired in; we couldn't go nowhere. They were outside and watching us. We couldn't go nowhere. We couldn't go nowhere.

Ilyana: Did you ever try to escape?

Koenig: We did, a few times because a lot of people did. We tried twice, and it didn't work. And so my mother said, "now, we came that far, being alive. Now we're not gonna let them shoot us." So we waited out until we had the right papers to leave Yugoslavia and go to see my father.

Ilyana: So, the camps you were in, were those like work camps or...?

Koenig: No, nobody could. It was only ladies and children and old people. Nobody, there was no work, no. No, we were just put in there to die, starve. Starvation, that's what it was.

And then I hear somebody say, "oh, I didn't have a shower for two days." But if you didn't even have a shower for three and a half years and didn't even see a toothbrush, didn't even see this and that. I would like to see how somebody, if I could only, there was no pictures taking. There is absolutely nothing showing what we went through. That's another thing, okay. With the Jewish people, they had people that took pictures of this and that and. Of course, Hitler did the wrong thing, like every leader they are cruel and rude and what they do is very, very bad and sad. Don't blame me what Hitler did. I had nothing to do with it. He did something very, very dumb. And if Hitler would not have been there, I wouldn't be here. You know, the whole world got upside-down because of that second war.

And then everybody says, oh, well, we have to learn something from it. Nobody learned anything. Look at the wars going on everywhere. All those beautiful little kids getting poisoned and getting killed and- What is, what is that? I get so upset when they talk about we should learn from the – they never learned anything yet.

Ilyana: So, would you say the reason the partisans did what they did was because of Hitler?

Koenig: Yeah, because they hated us; they hated the Germans. But yet, we built Yugoslavia up. Yugoslavia would never have been what it was if we would not have come there. Not me, I mean my ancestors, ok? They never. Those kind of people are entirely different. They hated us because we were Germans. But yet my father served in their army – they had to, everybody, every man when he was 18, he was pulled in. There was, at that time there was no war in Yugoslavia, but they were disciplined and whatever, which is ok, ok.

So, soon as he came home, he wasn't home two weeks! The Germans came and took him away. The Germans came and took 15, 16 year old boys into the war. Those boys had to go to the war not knowing how to even hold a gun! So, it was sad. It was very, very sad what they did to us.

Ilyana: is there anything else that you can tell me like about your experience that you want to say or anything like that?

Koenig: Well, I, the biggest regret is that I missed a lot of schooling. My schooling is I educated myself. I'm a self-educator, if you want to say that that way. Whatever I know, I taught myself. And that is my biggest, biggest issue about the whole situation, that I did not have a childhood, I didn't have a youth. We came to Germany, I was 14. I started to go to work because we were five people in a house and we needed, everybody needed to work. And that was it.

And then we came here. My husband and I came here with \$40 in our pocket. Had to go to work right away in order to build up and buy our old home, and at least it was ours and be proud of it.

Ilyana: Had you ever been to Germany before you were 14?

Koenig: Oh, no, no, no, no, no.

Ilyana: You just lived in Yugoslavia your whole life?

Koenig: Yeah, so I started. Well, when I started school, it was German. When my mother went to school, it was strictly Yugoslavian. My mother never learned how to write German when she went to school in Yugoslavia. My grandmother, my mom's mom, when she went to school, it was strictly German.

So it was up and down the Jahre, like I said, up and down the years. And then, and then we went to Germany. I was too old to go, well not too old but I had to work, that's, that's all I know how what was left for me. I, there was no school thought of because I had to help along for them to get on their feet.

Ilyana: So, I think that's all I have. Is there anything else you want to add?

Koenig: Well, like I said, I started in Yugoslavia. I, at one point I couldn't even talk German anymore, only Croatian. So, then we went to Germany, I had to learn their language. I had to learn that German because it's different. In every town in Yugoslavia, every Donauschwaben town, had their own slang, it was all different. And then, I changed three times also in my life. And then came here, didn't speak one word of English, started to work right away and build up another life. So my life had changed also three times.

And now I'm 82 and I'm very proud of it, that I'm alive and I can do what I can do.

Okay, well, uh, I cannot even say enough about the Donauschwaben people, about their ability, what they can do with ten fingers. There was no electricity, there was no running water, there was no, there was nothing. Nothing.

And then, of course, when we say up and down the Jahre, a search for a new home, and we found, we all found, a new homeland in the states. And God bless America, I cannot say enough. America did us all good. We all could better ourselves and live in freedom and a good life.

But make sure that you put that on: Who are the Donauschwaben, up and down the years and in search of a new homeland, which was here, but the past, we have to leave behind.

And you can imagine them building a little schachtel, what they call a schachtel, which means a box, out of wood and put themselves in there and travel along the Danube and find their land. It is really hard to describe if you don't have pictures to show because nobody had anything.

When they took us at the border, the clothes that I had on, that clothes, we walked out and we were released. For three and a half years. That was it. It shows you what a person could take when you want to survive. Without medication. Without a comb – my mom would comb my hair with her fingers. I had long braids, but then it all fell out. I had new hair coming in. But, it's hard to describe, that's all I can say. If you didn't go through it, you don't believe it.

Our life, the Donauschwaben life, was entirely different story. I can remember as a little child, they were talking about America. We had people in town, already getting a little bit populated. Too many people in a house, couldn't handle it no more.

So, my father's aunt, my father's sister's daughter, came here to Cuyahoga Falls. And I still got to meet her when we got here. She was 93. She left our hometown when she was 17. Just went on a boat. You know how long it took them to come here at that time?

Ilyana: a couple months, wasn't it?

Koenig: Yeah, over a month. Anyway, she settled, and there were a lot of young ladies that had to leave, and also young men, not only from Yugoslavia, from Ukraine, from different parts of Europe. And they settled in Pennsylvania in a coal mining town. And those ladies, those young ladies, went over there and took care of those young men that were working the coal mine, did their laundry, did their washing, and so on. So she met one, he was Polish, and they got married. And he made enough money. Then they came to Cuyahoga Falls. Bought a home, bought a farm, and worked on the farm.

Then he died, and then she sold the farm, she had two children, then she married, wouldn't believe that, then she married a guy that came from our hometown, that was left widower. She married that guy. But he also had passed away. But she still spoke the German that the people talked in our hometown, the same language. I mean, you, like the southerners speak, and so on. When we came, I could not believe it, how she still talked that kind of German, with all the years that she was here already. She was then already here over 60 years already here, or 70 years.

I mean, there are so many different stories about our people, what they had to go through in search of a better life. Some had it harder, some had it better.