The lives of ethnic Germans in Eastern Europe were seriously disrupted by World War II and its aftermath. This article contains some reminiscences and reflections of a survivor of concentration camp Gakowa. This was one of eight such camps established by Tito in the former Yugoslavia after the war specifically for ethnic Germans.

Hitler’s “ethnic cleansing” of Jews is well known and has been, and continues to be, highly publicized. Few weeks go by without Buchenwald, Dachau, or another of Hitler’s camps being mentioned in the US media in connection with a survivors’ story, a film, a play or some other `holocaust’ story. As important as it is to tell the story of Buchenwald and Dachau it is also important to realize that these stories are only a part of the holocaust history of World War II. Most people are familiar with the Jewish holocaust stories.
However, what is missing from the American media accounts is the revenge for Hitler’s crimes, taken in the years 1944 to 1950, against German speaking peoples in Eastern Europe. Gakowa and the other concentration camps established by Tito are also part of the World War II holocaust story even though few people know about these.¹

This ethnic cleansing by Tito, Stalin and others produced around 14 million refugees and caused about 2 million deaths. Yet it has received virtually no mention in the U.S. media. It was Eastern Europe and Russia that suffered most of the deaths and destruction of World War II, Russia lost more than 10 million of its people.

When Tito came to power in Yugoslavia in 1944, he established 8 concentration camps: Gakowa, Jarek, Kruschiwl, Krndija, Mitrowitz, Molidorf, Rudolfsgnad, and Valpovo. These became known as “death camps”. There was one and only one criterion for internment. If your last name was considered to be German, you were in.²


The purpose of this article is to supplement the author’s Testimonial in “A Pebble in my Shoe” and to reflect on the relevance of these 60 year old events to today’s world.

Gakowa is a rural village in the Vojvodina province of Serbia-Montenegro. It lies east of the Danube river just below the Hungarian border. It was founded and settled in 1763 by German speaking peoples who continued to speak a Germanic dialect until they were displaced by the Second World War. My mother is a seventh generation Gakowarer, making me and my sister eighth generation Gakowarer. Her ancestors were among the original settlers. My father was a fifth generation Gakowarer.

In “A Pebble in my Shoe” Katherine Hoeger Flotz helps us to fill this huge gap in our knowledge of World War II by telling her story as a survivor of concentration camp Gakowa. (She also tells the story of her husband George Flotz who was not in concentration camp but was a refugee.) I am also a survivor of the death camp Gakowa. Katherine and I are the same age and are second cousins. We both escaped, independently, after three years of internment from 1944 to 1947. From age 9 to age 12 we had no opportunity to go to school, to get medical treatment for illnesses, to get eye glasses repaired or replaced, or do any of the things we normally take for granted. I was seriously nearsighted, so when my eye glasses broke in 1944 I had no choice but to go without them. However, these were minor problems.

(untitled) Testimonial by Schreiner and the Testimonial “Dachau, Buchenwald, Gakowa”, by Zettl in “A Pebble in my Shoe” contain brief first hand accounts of survivors of concentration camp Gakowa.
The major problem was simply surviving. The food provided us by the camp was inadequate; we were served a “soup” containing little besides water. People who did not find a way, by whatever means, to supplement the food rations, simply starved to death. Many thousands are buried in mass graves next to the old cemetery. Until recently, these mass graves were unmarked. Cows were grazing on top of them when I visited there in 1974 and again in 1989. Until the fall of Milosevic, Yugoslavia did not admit the existence of Tito’s concentration camps. After the fall of Milosevic, some survivors were allowed to place a modest memorial plaque on the spot to commemorate the thousands of victims of concentration camp Gakowa.

Looking back, I realize that I had a very significant advantage over my cousin Katherine because I had parents. She and her younger sister Erna Hoeger Sesek (now living in Sedona, Arizona) lost both parents in 1944. My father, although he only had six years of schooling, spoke three languages: German, Serbo-Croatian and Hungarian. This made him useful to the commandant and helped him get on the crew that brought supplies in for the camp. Every day this crew took a train wagon, which they powered with their hands and feet, 20 kilometers to Sombor, the nearest town, for supplies. This gave my father an opportunity to smuggle in enough food to keep us alive. We also received some help from Serbian friends in nearby villages.

Another reason for my survival is the fact that Gakowa, the village of my birth, was chosen by Tito as a site for one of his eight concentration camps. In 1944, ethnic Germans were forced out of their homes and marched from nearby villages into Gakowa.
We were also forced out of our homes and the whole village of about 3000 people was put into a few houses in the center of town. After a few days, we were allowed to go back into our own house, but we could only use one room. The others were occupied by people from other villages. There were about 20 to 25 people in one room; straw was spread around the room, some blankets put on it, and people slept next to each other on these blankets.

Many people between the ages of 16 to 35 were taken by cattle trains to work in Russian labor camps. My parents managed to avoid this fate. My father because he was a member of the supply crew; my mother because she was too sick to go. My first cousin John Weber, my second cousin Tobias Brandt and many others were not so lucky. They spent several years, from about 1945 to 1950, in Russian labor camps. John and Tobias survived and are, at the time of this writing, living in the Chicago area. To give the reader some idea of the conditions these people lived under, I just mention that John Weber did not remove his shoes for two years. People in these labor camps slept in their clothes, including shoes, for warmth.

A number of my memories from concentration camp Gakowa are still vivid in my mind although the events described occurred some 60 years ago. Perhaps they can be best described as “snapshots”. They are the memories of a 10–year-old boy living under extraordinary conditions, conditions so bizarre that they are virtually impossible to comprehend by anyone who has not had similar experiences. Some of these snapshots are listed below in random order.
1. A few days after all Gakowa families were forced out of their homes and placed into a few houses in the center of the village, two of us 9-year-old kids snuck out of these guarded houses and roamed through the vacated houses. These houses had all been looted. The cows, horses, pigs, chickens, dogs, and cats were roaming freely. We saw a sow lying in a bed in a room! All animals disappeared very quickly, including the cats and dogs. I remember seeing people dig up a buried pig and bartering for parts of it.

2. After we were allowed to go back to our own house, [our house was U-shaped with one wing much shorter than the other] my parents, sister, grandmother and I were allowed to occupy the short wing. The long wing had several rooms, and each of these was occupied by internees from other villages. The area between the two wings was an open area used (before 1944) as a corn crib and storage area for farm equipment. (My parents were farmers before the war, working a small farm using horses to plow the fields. There were no tractors available there in those days.) The other rooms were occupied by people from other villages.

3. A latrine was constructed behind our house in some bushes. It consisted of just a long narrow trench with a plank over it that people could sit on. I remember when friends and I hid in the bushes behind the latrine and waited for some women to come use it. We then shot at them with a sling shot.

4. A playmate showed us the scar on his head where he had been shot, but
somehow he survived. My neighbor, who was a couple of years older than I, was not so lucky. He died from his wound.

5. Gakowa was guarded by Tito’s partisans, who encircled the village. My friends would sneak out at night to go begging for bread in the neighboring villages. I looked upon this as an adventure and begged my parents to let me go with them, but my parents would not let me go. Thanks to my father, we were not as desperate for food as the families of most of my friends. Kids would go begging for obvious reasons: they had more energy and were much more likely to get some bread.

6. Nevertheless, against the strict orders of my parents, I left the camp four times, all in daylight with a friend. We were caught twice. The first time we were marched through the center of town to see the commandant. He admonished us and then let us go. The second time we were not so lucky. When we saw a wagon coming along the road, we hid in a corn field until the wagon had past. When we then walked toward the road again a partisan guard suddenly stepped from behind a tree and confronted us. He had obviously seen us go into the corn field and then hid behind a tree waiting for us to come back out. He and his partner beat us and arrested us. I remember lying on the ground and being kicked with a boot. Then, we were locked up in a back room of the house where the guards lived and ignored. We could hear the guards in the front room playing cards, drinking, and laughing. Occasionally, one would go past our room to the outhouse in back, but they all kept ignoring us. After several hours, we got thirsty, hungry, and very restless. There was nothing in this room, and the floor was a dirt floor.
Somehow, using stones, we managed to remove the glass from a window and escaped from the room, but we still had to get through another door in the back of the house. We did not know if this door was locked, but were keenly aware that if we got caught we might suffer the same fate as my neighbor did. With trembling hands we tried to open the door and were overjoyed to find that it was not locked. We ran as fast as we could and did not stop until we were far, far away.

7. When the drummer marched along the main street through town, this was the signal for all people to assemble on the soccer field. From this assemblage the commandant would choose people for work crews. My mother was afraid she would be picked by the commandant to be sent to Russia, so she refused to go to the soccer field. She would hide and keep me with her; in the attic, or in the bushes behind the house. This was always a very exciting, dangerous, and scary time.

8. After the first year various diseases broke out, like typhoid and tuberculosis. There was no medical treatment of any kind or any medicine, but the seriously ill people were isolated from the others. On one occasion, the block we lived in was chosen to house the typhoid patients. There was a porch in front of the rooms along the entire length of the house. Every morning a few dead bodies were removed from the rooms, wrapped in a blanket, and placed outside on the porch. I remember looking at these wrapped bodies every day during this period. A horse drawn wagon would come down the street to pick up the dead bodies. They were piled on top of each other and taken to the cemetery for burial in the mass graves. (On my visit to Gakowa with my family in
1989) Mr. Grollinger, a friend of ours, went with us to the cemetery and the mass graves. He told us that he saw how the bodies were put into the mass graves: They were placed next to each other in a long row. When the row was full, quick lime was put over the bodies, and then another row placed on top and so on.)

9. We never managed to get rid of lice. My grandmother, (bless her soul, if anyone deserves to be a saint she does) would iron all our clothes, especially the underwear, but to no avail. The able bodied people were marched out into the fields to work, but those too sick or too old to work would lie around the front yard during the day and kill lice with their finger nails. When they stopped killing lice, it was a sure sign that they had given up on life.

10. Three years without school gave us children a lot of time to play if we could stay healthy and avoid malnutrition. My sister Anna got very ill and came close to dying on at least one occasion. I can remember only one instance when I started hallucinating. This lasted a couple of weeks. I assume that it was caused by malnutrition, but who knows? Fortunately, this never recurred. Of course, we had no balls or any other toys to play with, so we improvised. I remember at first we somehow got a hold of some pig’s bladders to use for soccer balls, but they didn’t last long, so we played with balls made from rags.

11. Cigarettes and cigars were not available. For a while, smokers improvised
with dried grape leaves wrapped in paper used for cigarettes, but soon there were no grape leaves left. Some tree roots served as powerful cigars. After a few weeks, there were no smokers among the inmates.

12. I remember a guard walking along who suddenly, and for no apparent reason, took out a whip and whipped an old lady.

13. When my mother and I were hiding in the attic or in bushes behind our house, my sister Anna, who is five years older than I (and lives in Park Ridge, Illinois), would hide in an oven. We had a large earthen oven, and she spent many hours hiding in it completely in the dark.

14. Few married couples were together; many men had died in the war, and others, men and women, were shipped to Russian labor camps. The couples who were still together had no privacy. Occasionally, I would see a couple, not necessarily married, sneaking into the hay loft or into the bushes in back of the house for sex.

15. In the fall of 1947 we escaped. The Hungarian border was only some 6 kilometers from Gakowa. Each of us, including the children, had a backpack containing what possessions we had left and felt we could carry across the border. My father and some of his friends acted as guides; they had studied the movement of the guards and timed their shift changes. During a shift change late in the evening, we managed to get out of the camp. We could not chance walking on the road and made our way through the
fields. Our rucksacks were packed so heavily that we could walk no more than a couple of hundred meters before we had to stop to rest. We would all sit in a circle and rest. My backpack was so heavy that I could barely stand up straight with it on my back, so during these short walks I bent forward and held my mother’s hand.

It was well past midnight when, after one of these rest stops, the guides could not agree which direction the border was. It was a dark and moonless night. My father started circling around our rest area in ever larger circles until he found a landmark which made it clear to him where we were and which direction we had to go. By the time we came close to the border, it was dawn. Then the guides had a conference to decide whether we should hide in the cornfields until the next night or risk crossing the border at dawn. The guides decided to risk the crossing. Just after we arrived in no man’s land, we could see border guards coming from their towers toward us, but by the time they got there we were in Hungarian territory and they did not pursue us.

16. Although Hungary was under communist rule at that time, the Hungarian government was not hostile to refugees and even offered us train service to a western zone of Austria. At that time, Austria was divided into four zones: American, British, French, and Russian. However, my father refused to let us get on this train for fear we would end up in Russia, so we made our way on foot through Hungary to eastern Austria which was in the Russian zone. We had some help from kind farmers who would offer to take us to the next village by horse drawn wagon.
17. It was October by the time we were close to the Russian zone of Austria. There we had to cross a river to get into Austria. There were seven of us: my parents, sister, grandmother, aunt, uncle, and I. We waded across the river at night. On the other side was an Austrian forest. We walked a couple of hundred meters into the forest and sat down. We could then hear the voices of the guards but, again, the guards did not pursue us. Wet and cold we sat in this forest waiting for dawn. We had no idea where we were. At dawn my father started circling again and somehow managed to find a kind farmer and persuade him to take us to a refugee camp. Thus we arrived in the refugee camp Wilfersdorf in Austria. My father became very sick, but he eventually recovered and we were shipped to refugee camp Pfeffernitz near Villach which was in the British zone.

18. After a few weeks in Pfeffernitz, my father managed to find a job as a bricklayer’s helper in Villach. With this job came housing, or what passed for housing, as five families shared an old barracks which was left over from the war.

19. At this point, starvation was no longer an issue but bugs were. We could not get rid of the bed bugs, especially lice, no matter how hard we tried, so we learned to live with them. My mother got a job doing laundry for the British troops, my sister became a maid for my father’s boss’s family, my grandmother ran the household, and I was allowed to go to school again. At age twelve, I was placed in fourth grade. After successfully completing fourth grade, I was allowed to go to Hauptschule. Refugee children were not allowed to go to Gymnasium in Austria. Although I was at least two years older than my classmates, I was physically smaller than the other students.

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3. In Austria there is a three track system: Gymnasium, Hauptschule, and Volksschule. Typically, graduates of Gymnasium go on to University, Hauptschule graduates become white collar workers and Volksschule graduates learn a trade.
(Apparently my growth and sexual maturity was delayed due to the abnormal conditions I had been living under.)

20. After a three year effort, we were allowed to immigrate to the US, but when we arrived in New York harbor on the ship *General Blatchford* we were denied permission to enter the US and detained on Ellis Island. The reason for this denial was that my mother had a spot on her lungs and was suspected of having tuberculosis which was a feared disease at that time. Although the US doctors who examined her in Europe passed her, the immigration doctors in New York did not.

21. I was separated from the rest of my family and placed in a cell with 5 other men. At 10 pm we took a communal shower, and then a guard locked us in. At 6 am we were awaked, dressed, and then locked out until 10 pm. At age 16, my first experience in the US was looking at the Statue of Liberty through a barbed wire fence during the day, and then locked in a cell with 5 other men at night.

22. After eleven days on Ellis Island, we were given permission to enter the US. (While we were on Ellis Island, we were legally not considered to be in the US.)

23. We arrived in Chicago by train on July 4, 1951. I was 16 years old, five feet seven inches tall and weighed 98 pounds. (I am now six feet and 2 inches tall and weigh about 190 pounds.) It was my responsibility to telephone friends who had agreed to pick us up at the train station. Since I had never seen a telephone before, I had no idea how to use one, so I stood next to a telephone booth and tried to get someone to help me make the call. After quite a few strange stares, a kind soul must have figured out what was going on and made the call for me.

24. According to Illinois law, I had to go to school until age 17. So against my
wishes and the wishes of my parents I was forced to go to school. At age 16 with seven years of schooling, I was admitted to Chicago Vocational High School on a trial bases. I did well enough to be allowed to continue. After reaching age 17, I decided to continue my schooling. My parents were strongly opposed to my continuing to go to school after age 17. Their attitude was that there was no reason to continue to go to school because, in the US, if people worked hard they could live comfortably, but I persisted and they reluctantly agreed to let me continue. During the summers, I worked as a janitor. My father and most of his friends were janitors, so I would substitute for them when they went on vacation in the summer. On the south side of Chicago in those days, most janitors were immigrants. Americans did not want these jobs because they were dirty. Buildings were heated by coal, and the garbage had to be removed and burned every day, so the janitors were on call seven days a week. Janitors were well paid, and I got the same pay for substituting as they did. Sometimes I worked two jobs at the same time and got paid for both. During my junior year in high school, I worked full time at Walgreen’s Drug store.

25. After graduating from high school, I went to Illinois Institute of Technology to study Engineering but quickly changed to Mathematics with the intention of becoming a high school Mathematics teacher. Looking back it seems clear to me now that the only two types of jobs I knew about in those days were janitors and high school teachers. Although janitors made more money, I chose teaching because I preferred to work with my mind. I also liked to work with my hands but enjoyed the challenge of using my mind more.

26. The competition at IIT was very strong, and I barely survived my first year
but my situation improved rapidly after that. I was extremely fortunate to meet two Professors, William Mahavier and John Neuberger, who taught Mathematics by the Socratic method, nowadays called the `discovery method’ or `inquiry based learning’ (IBL). This is the method commonly used in high school geometry classes: given a small set of axioms, about five, the students are given a (carefully organized) list of theorems and asked to prove these theorems justifying each step with an axiom or a previously proven theorem. This turned me on. I felt on an equal footing with my classmates. It didn’t matter that I was an immigrant kid from Chicago Vocational high school (possibly the worst high school in Chicago) and they came from the best suburban schools, all that mattered was whether or not you could prove the theorems. And each proof required only the use of your mind.

27. During my senior year these two Professors told me that they were transferring to the University of Tennessee in Knoxville and invited me to go there as a graduate student. The idea of going to graduate school had not occurred to me prior to this invitation and my parents never did understand the concept of `graduate school’. Upon reflection I accepted this invitation, went to Tennessee, and graduated at age 29 with a PH. D. in Mathematics under the supervision of John Neuberger.

28. Although I retired from full time teaching five years ago, I am still a practicing research mathematician with an international reputation and over 120 research publications in my field of differential equations.

SOME REFLECTIONS AND COMMENTARIES
An atrocity is an atrocity whether it is committed during war or peace. However, in peace time, we normally expect justice to prevail. The old lady who got whipped for no reason, the people who got raped, murdered, and maimed, had no recourse. There was no police to turn to, no judge, no jury. The commandant was all of these and more. The partisan guards were accountable only to him, and he was only accountable to those above him who were far away and not concerned.

Although the camp was established technically before the end of World War II, during all but the first few weeks it was run during “peace” time. Yet no one has ever been held accountable for the atrocities committed in Gakowa or in any of Tito’s other seven concentration camps. In fact, it was only recently, since the fall of Milosevic that the very existence of concentration camp Gakowa and the other such camps has been admitted and survivors have been allowed to place a modest memorial plaque to mark the mass graves. When I visited Gakowa with my family in 1974 and, again, in 1989, cows were grazing on top of the mass graves and there was no memorial of any kind or any other indication that these cows were grazing on top of mass graves.

The survivors of Tito’s concentration camps who ended up in Germany obtained some reparations from the German government. All others, including my parents, received nothing.
Of course, there were Hitler supporters among the inhabitants of Gakowa before and during the early years of the war. Toward the end of the war when the German troops were retreating from Yugoslavia, the Hitler sympathizers left with the German troops. They packed up their horse drawn wagon, and made their way to Germany. Only those who thought they had nothing to fear stayed behind. Revenge was taken not on the guilty but on the handy. Unfortunately this is not an uncommon phenomenon in human history.

Imagine Germany denying the existence of Dachau and Buchenwald! Yet, until quite recently, the former Yugoslavia denied the very existence of concentration camp Gakowa and the other seven death camps; a denial accepted by the State Department of the United States in spite of thousands of survivors including Katherine Flotz and myself! Surely the international community would not have tolerated the terrible ethnic cleansing which occurred in Yugoslavia in the 1990s if Tito’s ethnic cleansing of the German speaking people in 1944-1950 had been widely known internationally, and the wars in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo would not have occurred.

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