

Town of Two Nations



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WHAT WOULD YOU DO if you saw strangers tearing down your house stone by stone and carting it away?

The rules of life have been somewhat muddled in central Europe for more than a decade, and when Germans in Hermannsreuth, Bavaria, saw Czechoslovakian soldiers tearing down their homes, they didn't lift a finger to protest. Acceding to the rules of this age, they let their old homes go—and set about immediately to build new ones.

Hermannsreuth, by the accident of politics and geography, lies squarely on the German-Czech border. This boundary, which slices the town in two, was originally established between Austria and Germany prior to the first world war. It was re-established by both Germany and Czechoslovakia after 1918 and stood until

the Nazis marauded across the border in 1938. Throughout these years of partition, the townspeople owning land or homes on either side of the border were free to move back and forth in order to work their land or live in their homes.

But in 1945 these privileges were withdrawn; the Czech government confiscated the land and homes belonging to German farmers on Czech land and expelled the Germans across the border into Germany.

These farmers of Hermannsreuth were given temporary living quarters in the Bavarian portion of their town,

"This village attracted worldwide attention at the time the Czechs were tearing down the buildings on their side of the frontier," writes Resident Officer Gates. In this article he relates what natives and refugees of Hermannsreuth did when the German-Czech border threatened to completely unbalance their lives. Top photo shows thoughtful crowd at dedication of new homes. Right, townspeople file across snowy fields from new settlement.



where they were able to continue cultivating those of their fields which were inside Germany.

LIKE MOST EXPELLEES, these farmers never abandoned hope for eventual return to the place where they were born and where their ancestors had tilled the soil for centuries. It is natural, therefore, that they were bitterly disappointed to see Czechs begin to tear down the houses in their part of the village. Salvagable material—bricks, stones, wood—was sent into the interior of Czechoslovakia with Czech soldiers who, during the operation, lined the border with machine guns, contemplating trouble from the expellees.

Within a few weeks, the Czechs had completely destroyed everything which diligent generations had built, leaving—for reasons unknown—only a small church.

A significant example of discipline on the part of German expellees in Hermannsreuth is this: not a single incident occurred during the removal.

Even more significant is the fact that the expellees did not lose their courage or the initiative to start life anew. Instead of desponding, they began thinking and planning. In the minds of a few there developed a plan which for so small a town could only be considered fantastic.

The plan called for construction of 35 two-family houses. If this were done, it would mean all expellees in the village would have new apartments and the town would be rid entirely of its housing problem.

In the beginning, the plan hovered like a dream about the town. Then the townspeople of little Hermannsreuth took hold to fight it through.

IT WAS A TREMENDOUSLY DIFFICULT task. First of all, there was no money. The expellees did possess a few materials, things they had salvaged in secret from their homes across the border. But they needed help on a much larger scale. A town meeting was called

in March 1950, to which almost every citizen of the town came. The plan was explained in detail. German officials promised help. Through a series of negotiations and two additional town meetings, the following plan was finally adopted:

Thirty-five two-family houses would be built during a period of three years. A loan to the amount of DM 13,200 (about \$3,140) for each settler was approved and granted by the Bavarian Land Settlement Agency. On July 25, the first ground was broken.

Within three months, 16 houses were ready for occupancy. Construction of the remaining 19 houses will be completed by the fall of 1952. Total estimated cost of the project, including roads and water supply, is approximately DM 500,000 (about \$119,000).

The job was not left to the expellees alone. Both natives and expellees pooled their efforts to develop the community. Expellees were able to reduce construction costs considerably by performing manual labor themselves. The native farmers volunteered the use of their oxen and wagons for hauling wood, stone and other building materials to the site.

To save money and expedite construction, the traditional feast, given workers on completion of the framework, was omitted. However, last Nov. 10, when the first phase of the gigantic project was finished, representatives of both the state of Bavaria and the county of Tirschenreuth joined with the townspeople of Hermannsreuth to celebrate the inauguration. Everyone present hailed the spirit which had made the new community possible—the spirit whereby expellees and townspeople, confronted by the facts of life in 1950, acted positively upon them. +END

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The Gift of Self-Respect

plan as to how the "organized clothing" idea could be put into practice in these camps.

IF WE APPLIED my system there," she said to me with eagerness, "we would have a really functioning democratic state in terms our young people could understand. The best clothes received in the camps could be used, for instance, as a sort of reward or bonus to those most outstanding in cooperation; and the boys and girls would, moreover, be permitted to earn various pieces of clothing for needy members of their families by doing extra work in the camp.

"The less good clothing donated would serve an additional purpose of teaching the girls mending and renovating, and the worst clothing could be used for making rag rugs. Any remnants would go to our hard-pressed paper factories in exchange for paper for classroom use.

"Nothing would be given for nothing, you see, and the clothes would serve to prove the moral, as well as the material value of the system, down to the very last thread. If we can give the young the great gift of self-respect, then the fight for democracy is half won!" Frau Bonhoeffer said, and these words spoken quietly in the lamplight seemed to me singularly true. +END



All buildings in the Czechoslovakian part of the village, with the sole exception of the church, were destroyed.