

## Following the haunting

I am sitting in the corner of a dark room. It feels like the darkness is boundless, and so is my loneliness. I do not know where this all-consuming darkness begins and where it ends. When my psychotherapist asked who I could connect this vision to, the emerging answer caught me by surprise: my grandmother. Do I share this vision with her? Is she its author, or the carrier? Or is it her mother or grandmother? I wish I remembered the question or feeling that prompted the vision to emerge. Now I can only guess.

I am guided by an interest in how my family's past haunts the present, how it leaks into my everyday existence. Most importantly, what can I do with my haunting vision? Sociologist Avery Gordon points out that, unlike trauma, haunting signals a call for action, "a something-to-be-done."<sup>1</sup> In other words, you should seek ways to intentionally work with the entanglement of past-present injustices that affect your present existence. Hence, together with my mother, I embark on a journey to uncover the injustices lived by Volga German women in my family.

### Coming back

I was filled with excitement on my way to Moninger, one of the first German colonies on the Volga River founded in 1764, now known as Nizhnyaya Dobrinka. To be fair, I did not know it was one of the first maternal colonies before visiting the "Traditions and Life of Volga Germans" museum that is located there. It has been founded and is now managed by Liubov Kapustina, descendant of Volga Germans who lives next door to the museum. I called her the day before to schedule a tour, and she was very friendly and accommodating to our needs, like all the people working with Volga Germans' heritage that I have met on this trip. My mother and I arrived a bit before our scheduled tour, and I immediately jumped out of the car after a three-hour drive to walk towards the water flickering at the end of the street. But my eyes were not on the water but on the building close to the cliff — a ruined kirche.

---

<sup>1</sup>Gordon, Avery F. "Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity." *Borderlands E-Journal*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2011, pp. 1–21. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48782437>, p. 2.



Moninger Lutheran Kirche in Nizhnyaya Dobrinka village, Russia

I knew there was an abandoned Lutheran Kirche in Nizhnyaya Dobrinka. I even saw the photos online but I wanted to see it with my own eyes, to touch it, to feel it in some way. It was undeniable that it looked alien in the village. And as in all good stories of long awaited discoveries there was one

detail that made my experience surreal. Even before fully seeing the ruins of the church, I heard the sounds of music: "Let's raise our glasses for Russians the Russian way...!" The chorus of mainly women's voices were singing almost at the top of their lungs. Words were flying out of the open door in the building opposite the church, only to be carried away by gusts of wind. What a soundtrack for my trip! I felt as if it could not have been any other way. The first German colony on the Volga is now filled with Russian language, spirit, and thinking. Later, our tour guide Liubov Kapustina told us that the residents were rehearsing for the "Day of the Village" celebration.

Our next stop was Rosenberg — the hill of Roses. What a poetic name that is now hidden from the public view behind another name. Erasure persists. Marta never went back to Rosenberg, so I felt obliged to bring her there in my thoughts, feelings, and DNA. What I saw disappointed me, even though I tried to suppress that disappointment. It was an ordinary village with crooked houses, a small Orthodox church, and an administrative building. I did not feel connected and it hurt. The reality is that my home is in Siberia.

Our last stop was a gorgeous Neo-Gothic Church of St. Anthony built in 1912. It was a beautiful golden hour moment all the while filled with sadness for the perished life.

## Surviving amid disaster

I never thought of my family as being *lucky* to survive during Soviet time, and especially during and after the deportation to Siberia. Now, I think that *lucky* is not an accurate description of their survival. In August 1941, my great grandmother Marta Ziegler was thirteen when the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR issued a decree necessitating the

resettling of the entire German population living in the Volga region. This decree changed the life of half a million Volga Germans that were ordered to resettle in Siberia and parts of Central Asia.

My haunting originates in the moment of sheer terror. It traveled through three generations to settle in my head and my heart. I close my eyes for a few seconds and try to imagine how terrified a young girl might feel at the prospect of losing her family and being removed from the close-knit community of Rosenberg village. What words and definitions can I use to describe the moment of uncertainty and existential threat? I do not know yet, but I urge my mother not to use the word evacuation, and use deportation instead. The state was not trying to evacuate them to safety, nor provide sufficient care. It was a process of violent uprooting, involving forced labor in labor camps and resettlement in Siberia. The question I am intrigued by is how Marta built a new life, seized moments of joy, and ultimately found courage to trust people again while living through the nightmare of a deportation.

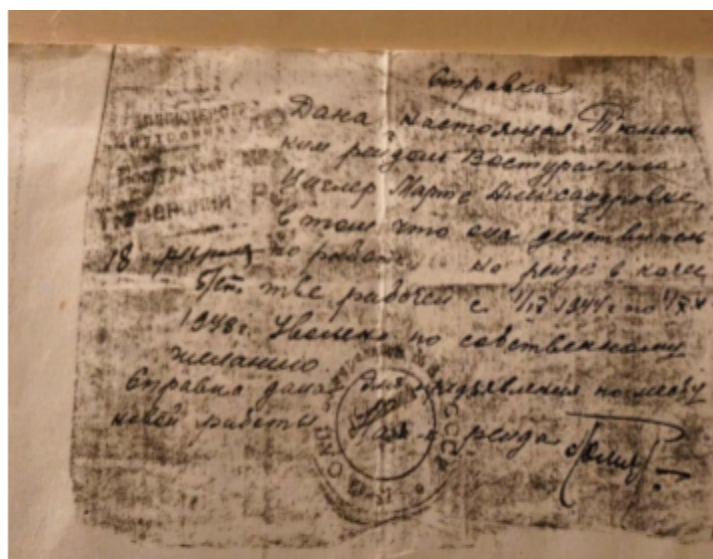


Church of St. Anthony in Ust'-Zolikhha, Russia

Trust is a sensitive issue for me. I cannot count how many times my mother told me to, whatever happens, always rely on *myself* first. Now, I think that the lack of trust is part of my family's painful heritage. Nonetheless, I think Marta attempted to trust people again. Kindness, compassion and solidarity were not completely gone during those dark times. It struck me when almost in every conversation about Marta's early life in the Tyumen region<sup>2</sup> my mother would mention a very specific name she caught from Marta — Uncle Kayum. The persistence of this name in the family's memory, now through three generations, is extremely telling. Marta remembered the kindness of Uncle Kayum who helped the deported family by bringing food, particularly crucian carp, a type of fish very common for the area. Kayum is a name of Arabic origin that is popular in Tatar communities. Siberian Tatars are a large ethnic group, consolidated primarily in the western parts of Siberia, residing in cities such as Tyumen, Tobolsk, and Omsk.

I am trying hard to focus on the kindness of Siberian Tatars that helped Marta and her family survive. This is something we do not find in history books: the healing power of solidarity cultivated through small acts.

## Labor



A copy of the employment certificate, from the author's family archive.

"This certificate is issued by the Tyumen Unit of the Vosturallag to Marta Alexandrovna Ziegler. [The certificate confirms]... that she did work at the Tyumen Unit as a laborer from September 1944 to October 1948. Dismissed of her own will." I read the copy of this certificate over and over again – a document that miraculously survived in the family archive. Dismissed of her own will. In other words, by her own choice. It

<sup>2</sup>Marta and her family were deported to Tyumen in Western Siberia.

sounds like mockery. Marta was obliged to work at a labor camp as every deported German woman ages 16-45 except for pregnant women and women with children three years old and younger.

I do not remember when exactly I had a clear realization that my great grandparents went through the labor camp that was part of the GULAG system. My mother would mention Marta's work at a timber rafting station on the river. Can you picture a sixteen-year-old standing in knee-high cold water pushing heavy logs alongside other German women? What's a play of imagination for me, was a lived experience for Marta. I hoped to find her name in the digital archive of all the laborers who went through Vosturallag. She is not there. She has been erased and forgotten. I am left wondering how many more women are absent from archives, and how we can keep memories of them alive.

Despite these hardships, Marta persevered. She met her husband Valter, a Crimean deportee, in the camp. Together they started a family, and my grandmother was born in a special settlement, growing up to be fluent in both German and Russian. This longing for a simple life filled with family, home, and professional realization, is indeed a resistance against the system that aims to humiliate and destroy you.

### **What's next?**

I am staring at a promotional banner framed in fluorescent lights in Tyumen International Airport: "In Siberia of one's own free will". I am from Siberia, and should be proud of this catchy branding slogan but it does not resonate with me. Instead, I feel a growing nagging feeling inside. Doesn't it suggest that we, Siberian settlers, should move on past dark histories without collectively reflecting upon their impacts on our Siberian identity. It also normalizes the historical erasure of political deportations and experiences linked to the labor army. In turn, these historical erasures keep feeding my haunting.

A few weeks ago, my mother and I found out that Marta had an elder sister — Lydia. She never said a word about her. What a burden to be silent about the loved ones. Siberia was neither Lydia's nor Marta's choice. My home is their suffering, survival, and persistence. This personal story is my bridge to others who were unwillingly brought to

Siberia. Our collective stories are an antidote to the silencing of injustices experienced by women.



The author with her great-grandmother Marta.

My haunting is a confirmation that Siberian history is not clear but rather messy, muddy, and hard to digest. I don't know whether I am finally emerging from the dark room myself or whether it is slipping off me like a heavy cloak. All I know is that I am standing on a white canvas where I can write whatever I want. I decided to leave my footprints and muddy our social reality to bring justice for Marta, Lydia, and countless other women turned into ghosts of history.