

**W**ir holen euch Heim ins Reich." (We'll bring you back into the empire) Adolf Hitler promised the ethnic Germans in Poland and Czechoslovakia in 1938. By this he did not mean that he would move them back to Germany, but rather that he would move Germany to them, expanding the borders of his empire to include these areas.

The first area to be annexed, in the autumn of 1938, was Sudetenland in western Czechoslovakia. Ethnic Germans had lived there in the Middle Ages when it was part of the Kingdom of Bohemia. The region was later taken over by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and remained a part of it until 1918, when the empire crumbled and the state of Czechoslovakia, including Sudetenland, was established. The ethnic Germans living there became Czechoslovakian citizens but were allowed to retain their culture, language and traditions. When Nazi troops marched into Czechoslovakia in 1938, the German population of Sudetenland lined the streets to cheer them.

**A**t the end of the war, with Germany defeated, European borders were redrawn and Sudetenland was returned to Czechoslovakian rule. The Czechoslovakians wasted no time in deporting the 16 million ethnic Germans, forcing them to leave their homes and most of their possessions behind.

Now, almost 50 years later, the old wounds of both Sudeten Germans and Czechoslovakians have been reopened by the German-Czechoslovakian friendship treaty, signed by Chancellor Helmut Kohl and President Vaclav Havel at the end of February. The treaty is designed to inaugurate a new era of cooperation, political as well as economic, between the two countries. But many Czechs, fearing a united Germany strong economically as well as politically, protested against the treaty, booing Kohl and calling Havel a traitor for signing it. They also criticized the wording of the treaty, in which Prague concedes that it was wrong to expel the ethnic Germans after the war.

The Sudeten Germans, on the other hand, termed the treaty a sell-out on the part of the German government because it negates their claims for compensation from the Czech government. To make matters worse, their former properties, state-owned since 1945, are currently on the auction block. But, since only Czech citizens can legally own property there, the Sudeten Germans are prohibited from bidding (though many are doing so through straw men).

Not all Sudeten Germans are interested in a return of their property. Those old enough to have vivid memories of Sud-



# CZECHMATE

## A visit to Sudetenland stirs up the memories of some Germans

by Ginger Henry-Künzel

etenland are now at or near retirement age. And it is highly unlikely that anyone who has established a life in Germany over the past 47 years would really want to return permanently. It is a region whose perspective and appearance changed drastically under the grey cloak of Communism and whose development was brought to a virtual standstill. For those Sudeten Germans who think that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, a short journey across the border may be all they need to see for themselves that the green green grass of home is now here in Germany and not in Czechoslovakia.

**T**his is the story of one such man's journey. Gustav and I walk over to the stone marking the border between Czechoslovakia and Germany.

"Look at how the border curves around through those woods over there. A far cry from the straight state borders in the western part of your country," he remarked.

"Ah, you've been to the U.S.?" I asked with surprise.

"Yes, as a prisoner of war in 1944-46," he said. "We were taken by ship from Naples to Newport News. Then on to Missouri, Iowa, Minnesota and Nebraska, working in the fields. When I finally arrived back in Germany after the war, my hometown was under Czechoslovakian rule, my family had been relocated and the long search for them began."

The civilian population of Sudetenland--women, children and the elderly--had been herded into deportation camps at the end of the war to await processing. Gustav's wife, Marie, and his son, Andreas, were among those refugees.

Andreas, only four at the time, can remember little about those difficult times. He does, however, recall spending end-



*The ravages of Communism: Asch before World War II and in 1965.*

hour drive from Munich, where he lives today.

Now, Gustav stands at the border and gazes across at the cornfields where he used to work with his father. The old road crossing the border here is overgrown, closed since 1945. The present road continues three miles further along the border before reaching the official crossing where a long line of cars is waiting to enter Czechoslovakia.

*Photos: Courtesy of Sudetendeutsche Archive*

less days (or was it weeks?) in a cattle car on a journey to an unknown destination. He still remembers clutching his mother day and night in constant fear that he might become separated from her and lose the last remaining piece of his world.

**H**is mother's memories, of course, were more vivid. Andreas recalls the stories she told him when he was growing up, about when the first Czechs came to her house and told her to move out. Summoning all her courage, she chased them away with a toy pistol, shouting the few words of Czech she had learned in school. But a short time later others returned. This house had been assigned to them and they were moving in; she would have to give up her home and possessions and join the endless stream of refugees crossing into Germany.

After a short stay in a deportation camp, Marie and Andreas boarded a train to carry them to an unknown fate. Sometimes the train would stop, and the frightened refugees would slide open the door of the cold damp windowless car, wondering where they were and if this was the final destination. Many passengers died en route and were hurriedly buried alongside the tracks.

**F**inally the train arrived in a rural village in Hessen. From here the refugees were trucked to a remote hamlet high on a hill, where the peasants were forced to take them in.

Marie had no idea whether her husband, if he was still alive, would ever be able to find her and their young son in this God-forsaken village, hundreds of miles from their former home. She was not alone in her plight. At the end of the war, 16 million ethnic Germans were either homeless, had fled or been deported from the Polish and Czechoslovakian regions. One out of four people of German ethnic origin was looking for a missing relative. The Red Cross organized a mammoth effort to aid in the search. Hearing of this, Marie filled out the proper forms and then waited.

Three long years she waited, earning a living by helping the village farmers. Finally, in 1949, Gustav returned from his imprisonment in a French POW camp. Thanks to Marie's prayers and the Red Cross, the family was reunited. Now 50 years old, Andreas has convinced his father to accompany him on a visit to their ancestral home. Although it always seemed to Andreas like this town was light-years away, it is actually only a three-

hour drive from Munich, where he lives today.

Now, Gustav stands at the border and gazes across at the cornfields where he used to work with his father. The old road crossing the border here is overgrown, closed since 1945. The present road continues three miles further along the border before reaching the official crossing where a long line of cars is waiting to enter Czechoslovakia. In addition to the line of cars, we see many people on foot, carrying small electrical appliances and groceries—things either unavailable or prohibitively expensive in Czechoslovakia.

At the crossing the guard leafs through our passports and peers at Andreas and Gustav before waving us through with a slightly suspicious look on his face. A small but vocal minority of former Sudetenland inhabitants contend that their property was illegally confiscated by the Czech government and should now be returned to them. Others come to dig in the woods or fields, or even in the yards, looking for possessions which they hid before their deportation.

**E**ntering the town of Asch, Gustav is disoriented. Abandoned lots line the street where houses once stood. Suddenly he recognizes something: "That building was one of the finest restaurants in town." We park the car and walk inside. It is still possible to dine here, though one needs more than just a bit of fantasy to imagine its former elegance.

Having stilled our hunger, we drive to the center of town. Gustav again seems confused. "This was the main square," he tells us, pointing to a deserted area overgrown with grass and bushes. "The Goethe statue over there stood in the center." It is difficult for me to picture this desolate field as the center of a prosperous city. Nearby are blocks of apartments, constructed in the typical Communist style—depressing grey cement barracks with small windows. Further up the street houses built in the art nouveau style still stand. Although, the facades are crumbling, they give a hint of how the town must have appeared before the war when it was one of the region's most important textile centers. We reach an overgrown piece of property at the edge of town, opposite a small pond. "This was where our homestead was," Gustav says pensively. "I had heard that the house had been torn down years ago, but I couldn't believe it until I saw it with my own eyes."

As we head back across the border, I ask Gustav if he is glad that he made the trip "back home". "For almost 50 years I have longed to return, dreaming of the day when it would become possible," he replied. "And I'm glad I came; now it's clear that this is no longer home. Living here now, under these conditions, would be more a nightmare than the fulfillment of a dream."