

The Life Story of a German Woman from Vizmberk in the 20th Century

In the Šumperk and Jeseník districts and in the Sudetenland in general, Czechs and Germans often had very eventful lives. Some of their stories are well known and were even described in books, but it was not only famous or outstanding people who lived complicated lives. Even the life stories of common people reflected the turbulent times. By writing this article I would like to save a story of such a person from oblivion.

Her name was Sofía Rotter and she was born in Vizmberk (Loučná nad Desnou), and I learnt her story from her daughter Erika Bednářová. I have recorded it the way I heard it just with a minimum comment as it speaks volumes in itself.

Sofía was born on 14.5.1900 into a large family of Franz Gabriel, a factory worker and later supervisor. The Gabriels had 13 children altogether, but one of them died soon after birth. Three Sofia's brothers fell in WWI and two of her siblings emigrated to the USA after the war. The family lived in a block of flats called the Familienhaus, which is still standing in the village centre. Mother had to take menial jobs, e.g. at the local brickworks, to make ends meet.

At the beginning, Sofia's life was similar to those of many other poor girls. In 1914, when she had finished school, she started as a maid in a rich family in Šumperk and later in Ostrava. She got pregnant by the landlord and gave birth to an out-of-wedlock daughter, who she brought up at her parents' place in Vizmberk from 1923. She made her living by doing odd jobs, picking forest fruit and the like. In 1928 she married Josef Rotter who was a small farmer in nearby Pekařov. Her husband also worked in a paper mill in Jindřichov. They had two children: one of them was Erika, who I got my information from. However, the marriage did not last long as Josef had suffered a serious injury to the lungs when he was fighting in WWI and he never recovered from the permanent damage. Once in 1933 he caught a cold on his way to work and died most probably of pneumonia. His grave has been preserved until now in the Pekařov cemetery. Two years after his death, the young widow had to move out of the cottage in Pekařov because her husband's younger brother inherited the farm. She ended up at her parents' again.

Once again she had to do odd jobs to support her family. She even took a job with a firm laying tarmac surface on roads. There was also a period during which she commuted on foot to Velamos in Sobotín. She had a small widow's pension and that was probably the main reason why she never remarried even though she had another two children with her new boyfriend. If we look back at her life, we cannot blame her for being of left-wing political opinions and for supporting Social Democrats and Communists, who were quite strong in Vizmberk before WWII. However, 1930s in the borderland were full of nationalistic tensions with German chauvinism, fuelled from the Reich, getting more and more aggressive. Sofia did not like the nationalists in the Sudeten German Party and her attitudes were well-known. Her children were members of the Rote Falken, a left-wing youth organisation, and wore their typical uniforms: blue skirts/trousers and red scarves.

At that time, Vizmberk Nazis had a detailed list of all local antifascists and communists, so in early October, immediately after the Annexation, they had them arrested and put in prison in Šumperk. Sofia Rotter was among them, and like the others, she was subjected to severe interrogation and even torture at the District Court. The very next day after her arrest, her three under-age children were deported to a so-called "Gingerbread House" in Velké Losiny for "reconditioning". When their mother came home after about a fortnight, she only found her youngest child, who had been left in its grandparents' care. As soon as she learnt of her children's location, she immediately set off for Velké Losiny and managed to take them away with her.

Her oldest daughter was already working as a maid in Šumperk then. As she was partly Jewish, she was in danger of internment, but through concurrence of circumstances she managed to avoid that.

When Sofia's parents died soon after each other in 1939 and 1940, she found herself in danger of being deprived of her all her four children once again, because she was considered disloyal to the regime. So she promptly sent the two older children to her relatives in Svitavy and Šumperk, but the younger ones were taken away and placed in children's homes in Králíky and Čelákovice. Later on, her son, who was then under 10, was put in the care of a farmer in Žleb u Hanušovic to get a "proper" upbringing. He and other Russian children had to work almost as hard as adults there and he did not even have time to go to school. After the war, his mother had to walk there and take him back home with her.

During the war, Sofia worked at Velamos in Vizmberk. She helped the prisoners of war who were working on armament production in Vizmberk – Russians, Poles and Frenchmen – as much as she could. For her contacts with them she was repeatedly questioned and interrogated. In spring 1945 she even hid a German Army deserter. When, on May 9 1945, the Red Army liberated the village, the Russian prisoners of war shielded her and she managed to avoid the harsh treatment other Germans typically received from Red Army soldiers. Later on, when the Russian prisoners were leaving for their homeland, they all told the Rotters they would not forget them, but none of them got in touch with them and the Rotters never knew anything about what fates befell to them in the USSR.

The situation got much worse when Czechs replaced the Russian soldiers. They paid no heed to the fact that during the occupation Sofia was persecuted as an antifascist and treated her the same way as any other Germans who were, in their eyes, all guilty. Like other Germans, she was not allowed to use public transport and even a bicycle. In early August 1945, her daughter Erika was summoned by the local authorities to Olomouc, supposedly to take part in hops picking. In actual fact, she and other young Germans were deported to an internment camp in Hodolany. She had to work on clearing war debris, filling up trenches as well as in a factory. The living conditions in Hodolany were terrible as e.g. the internees had to sleep on bare floor. It took her relatives a month and a half to claim her back.

Sofia Rotter was not deported and stayed in Vizmberk. Her daughters married Czechs and remained there as well. However, in spring 1948, in a campaign for resettling remaining Germans within Czechoslovakia, the state authorities decided to have her transferred to the Uničov area, where she worked on farms, e.g. in Želechovice and Dětrichov, without wages, just receiving food and accommodation. Only after three years German antifascists from Rapotín managed to take her with them to Rapotín, where she was allocated a flat and a job in the local glassworks. She stayed there until her death in 1974. She retired at the age of 65, but her meagre pension (initially Kčs600) was not sufficient and she had to be supported by her daughters. Nevertheless her last 24 years were in fact the only peaceful time in her life.

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