

# History of Filipovo

*Contributed by Paul Hoenisch*

The history of the settlement of Filipovo:

Our ancestors went south on the Danube River, settling in Hungary, Yugoslavia and Rumania. The first German settlers, numbering eleven families, came to Filipovo in 1762. These pioneers came from the Black Forest and other Alsace Lorraine regions of Germany going south on the Danube River from Ulm (Ulmer Schachtel). The first Hoenisch mentioned was Martin Hoenisch, born in 1743 and died in Filipovo in 1811. His son Georg was the first Hoenisch born in Filipovo in 1765.

The region and town as I remember:

The neighborhood towns were all about 5 miles apart; in between the towns some of the larger farmers had their land with farmhouses. The ground was very fertile and almost anything would grow. The major crops were wheat, oats, corn for export, and hemp, which is a flax (fiber) used for linen and clothing. All the houses had a large garden, growing their own vegetables, fruits and grapes. The highest hill in town was the Stations of the Cross to the Cemetery Chapel. You could almost see from one end of the town to the other because of the square layout of the streets. The town had no hospital, one doctor, and one drug store. Only one street from the train station to the center of town was paved. The houses had no running water or sewer (you had to go to the outhouse, only a large well in the middle of the yard was the water supply for the entire household). The houses were made of dried wood mud blocks and heated mostly with dried wood and the discards of hemp and corn.

The largest family in town had 19 children with many more families having 10 or more. In 1944 the population of Filipovo was 5300. Most of the children went to school for 6 grades, the ones going longer had to go to a larger city. The boys and girls were separated, with the girls having nuns as teachers. The subjects were reading, arithmetic, and writing, with some history. The main language was German and some Yugoslavian or Hungarian, whenever it belonged to these countries. The teachers were very strict and on many occasions we went home with a sore -- you know what.

Some of the traditions of the town:

The population of the town was 99% Catholic. A wedding was a big event for the families involved with many preparations, like home cooking baking all the delicious cookies; all the wine and whiskey was homemade. Some of these weddings lasted 2-3 days. The godfather and godmother for the children were selected by the new parents before the children were born, and they served as godparents for all the children born to the couple. The first-born boy and girl always received the same first name as the godparent. All the children were born and delivered by midwives.

The tradition was the godmother cooked homemade chicken soup and baked light cookies with a bottle of the best wine bringing them to the new mother the first few days. Many traditional holidays were observed, the biggest being the annual Kirchweih (Philip, name of the church patron) the first weekend in May. Not only was it a religious affair but also fun with carnival rides, shooting stands, and many other traditional affairs. On Sundays only the necessary jobs were performed, in the afternoon the men gathered in front of different houses playing cards and talking. The woman also came together doing some knitting and talking. Almost all the families had their own pigs, chicken, ducks and geese. I remember going on many occasions with my Hoenisch Grandfather butchering pigs for the townspeople and receiving a small bratwurst. To my knowledge most of the salaries were paid in goods instead of money.

I would like to put a little humor to the story of Filipovo; most of the older living could back me up to this being true. You have to remember this dates back to the late 30s and early 40s. The cows and pigs were taken out of town every weekday to the pasture. The different men responsible (Kuhalter & Sauhalter) started collecting the animals from one end of the town in the morning, bringing them back in the early evening. After a few days the animals knew which house they belonged to and the owners just opened their gates and let them in their stalls. To this day it is hard to believe that they knew which house they belonged to because many houses looked alike.

Some of the happy memories of my short-lived childhood in Filipovo:

What a thrill it was waking up Christmas morning seeing the Christmas tree filled with homemade cookies and candies, receiving one orange for Christmas. One of the happiest traditions for the kids was getting up early morning New Years Day and going to all the relatives wishing them Happy New Year and receiving a little money from all. After the first snowfall the kids from the Neighborhood building our own snow mountain in the street; we could use this hill for sledding all winter long. How happy we were playing all the different games with self made balls and toys and running around barefoot all summer long. I remember having a lot of sore and bleeding toes.

All this ended on Good Friday 1945 when the remaining old and children of Filipovo's lives were shattered. We were told to pack up whatever we could carry and be out of the house in an hour. All were put in cattle cars and taken to the concentration camp Gakowa; there only the strong and healthy survived or escaped. From the Hoenisch family, more than a dozen starved and are buried in mass graves there. The history books of the world have not recorded the destruction of those over 2000 innocent victims of Filipovo. Today Filipovo is still on the map of Serbia (new name Backi Gracac); most of the houses still stand with strange people living in them. The church is no more; there are no graves or gravestone visible in the cemetery.

A few years ago while traveling in Europe, I was determined to see my birthplace one more time, but some of the people who went back to Filipovo advised against going. I was told instead to cherish the old memories. On many occasions as I drive to the Pennsylvania Dutch Country to observe the Amish people with their lifestyle and way of life, it brings back many happy memories of my childhood, the town of Filipovo, and our ancestors.

In closing, I would like to remind the younger generation be proud of your heritage, find out more about it, ask the living about their childhood, record dates, and events. We are all part of the history of the world that should not be forgotten. I'm sure as our forefathers look down on this gathering and see the branch of the family tree they have contributed to, they would be proud of the Hoenisch family they started.

May they all rest in peace.

Thank you for listening to my little story of Filipovo.