

Steppenläufer (Tumbleweed). 2018

Installation: archive photo, textile, latex, ventilators

The tumbleweed is a bushy steppe plant that grows into a spherical form which, once uprooted, can be carried over long distances by the wind.

My stepfather Alexander Davidovich Hilgenberg was a Russian German. His life, like that of many of his countrymen, was difficult. He was born in 1912 in the Volga region, in the village of Phillipsfeld, but in 1941 his entire family – his father David Davidovich, brother David and sisters Irma, Erica and Olga – were deported to Kazakhstan and Siberia. From there, Alexander Davidovich was conscripted into the Labour Army, and sent to the Ivdel work camp in the Northern Urals, where he married a German woman named Emma Mayerle, who was also serving in the Labour Army. They were later moved to the Vizhai special settlement, where they had two daughters – Lilya and Vera. In 1968, Alexander Davidovich went to live in the village of Nizhniye Sergi, in Sverdlovsk Oblast. He was director of the local forestry enterprise until his retirement. After the death of his wife, his adult daughters left for other cities and he was left alone, and so my mother, having by that time lost my father, became his support. They changed their flats for a single “two-roomer” and moved in together, my mother looking after him when he suffered a stroke. He died at home, in the Urals, and is buried beside my parents. His life story is my story too. And I want to talk about him, but not just about him. The lot of the Russian Germans has been unfairly tragic. Invited to Russia in the second half of the 18th century by Catherine the Great, they settled along the Volga, in the Southern Ukraine and Crimea. In September 1941, right at the beginning of the Great Patriotic War, all of them without exception were evicted from their native Volga to Siberia and Kazakhstan. About a million people were expelled from their homes. Of these, around 300 thousand were then drafted into the Labour Army and sent to the most remote areas of the USSR, where they worked and lived in special settlements and camps. Only in 1955 were they allowed to return to the original places of deportation – to Kazakhstan and Siberia, though the Germans were forbidden from returning to the Volga region where they had lived up until 1941. The Russian Germans never resettled in their homeland – in the 1990s the new Russian leadership did everything to prevent the restoration of the Volga German Republic. Many Germans then left Russia, emigrating to Germany. Russian Germans are a wandering people, they put down roots in Russia and it became their real motherland, but the Soviet government cruelly tore up a whole people from their native land. The Russian Germans have been driven around the world, just like the wind chases the dried out balls of the tumbleweeds that my stepfather saw so much of in the steppelands, where he was taken and left to survive in as best he could, back in the autumn of 1941.

Leonid Tishkov

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