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## CRIMEAN TATAR'S TRACES IN VORARLBERG<sup>1</sup>

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In the course of research on the history of Tatar forced laborers, the author came across a little-known chapter of Vorarlberg's history: the tragic history of a Muslim minority, Turkic-speaking Crimean Tatars, who fell between the millstones of the Nazi policy of conquest and extermination in Eastern Europe and Stalinist tyranny and were suffering a lot in the process. One trace of this minority leads to Austria's westernmost State of Vorarlberg: In 1945/46, a refugee group of surviving Crimean Tatars was stranded here and housed in the village of Alberschwende.

**Keywords:** Crimean Tatars, Muslim minority, forced labours, Second World War in Austria.

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### *On the fate of the Crimean Tatars during the Second World War*

The troops of the German Wehrmacht conquered the Crimea from September to November 1941. During the advance of the 11th Army under General Erich von Manstein (Field Marshal from July 1, 1942), Tatars who had fought on the side of the Soviet Army fell into the hands of the advancing Wehrmacht, and hundreds of Tatars were executed because they were suspected of partisan activity. The National Socialist large-scale and racial planning in the East envisaged the Crimea, renamed "New Russia", to be connected to Germany via a highway and to be settled with Germans<sup>2</sup>.

By March 1942, the German occupiers, who wanted to turn Crimea into a "Gibraltar of the Black Sea," had managed to recruit some 10,000 Crimean Tatars to guard prisoner-of-war facilities under the 11th Army (Penter, 2011). At that time, about 4,000 men were already available in the local militias or as village elders, who forced

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<sup>1</sup> Paper first printed in German at: Werner Bundschuh: Turksprechende Krim-Tataren. Spuren in Vorarlberg. In: Wanderungen. Migration in Vorarlberg, Liechtenstein und in der Ostschweiz zwischen 1700 und 2000. Hg. v. Peter Melichar/Andreas Rudigier/Gerhard Wanner (=vorarlberg museum schriften 21. Schriftenreihe des Arbeitskreises für interregionale geschichte des mittleren Alpenraumes. Band 3). Wien-Köln-Weimar, 2016: 191–204.

<sup>2</sup> An important survey into the German occupation policy in Ukraine given by Tanja Penter (Penter, 2011).

to select the labor force to be deported to the German Reich. And thousands of Crimean Tatars were sent to the "Reich" for forced labor. There, they were generally considered "Eastern workers". Under the pressure of the German occupation forces, several Crimean Tatar labor battalions were initially formed out of the Ukrainian-Russian population, providing 'evidence' for Stalin that "the Tatars" were 'collaborating with the enemy' and he arranged for their deportation.

Starting in November 1943, volunteers were recruited for the "Ostmuselman SS Regiment 1," an SS unit consisting of members of so-called "Oriental peoples". By this, the Nazi rulers meant the non-Russian and non-Slavic peoples of the area from the Crimea through the Caucasus to Central Asia. While a large part of this ethnic group (around 22 million in 1939) was also influenced by Islam, other nationalities, such as the Georgians and Armenians, who did not belong neither to Muslims nor to the "Turkic peoples" were also found in this area (Hoffmann, 1986). However, probably for reasons of simplification, they were viewed as a single entity and referred to and treated as "Turkic peoples." On the German side, approximately 53,000 Cossacks, 310,000 Russians, 250,000 Ukrainians, 5,000 Kalmyks, 180,000 Turkestanians, 110,000 Caucasians, 40,000 Volga Tatars, and 20,000 Crimean Tatars supposed to fought against "Bolshevism"<sup>3</sup>.

After the Red Army gave up Sevastopol in July 1942, German and Romanian troops took over all of Crimea. As in the entire southern Soviet Union, the systematic murder of Jews, Communists, and Roma as well as "Krymchaks"<sup>4</sup> began in Crimea by "Einsatzgruppe D" (Deployment Group D), which killed at least 40,000 Crimean inhabitants in cooperation with the German Wehrmacht. This special unit was also intended to use violence to make certain that as many Crimean Tatars as possible will cooperate with the occupiers.

But the Crimean Tatars had different attitudes toward the German occupiers. People in eastern Crimea were more oftenly willing to fight with the Germans against the Red Army than in western Crimea (around Simferopol and Bakhchisaray, the unofficial "capital" of the Crimean Tatars). Consequently, the scale of deportations of Crimean Tatars for forced labor to the German Reich varied (Report, 2004: 112–115). Because some of the Crimean Tatars, as well as parts of other Caucasian peoples, had "committed themselves to the German cause" during the Nazi occupation of their homelands, they were to be placed in a better position than the other "Eastern workers" in the "Reichseinsatz" (Deployment to the "Reich") from 1944 onward and were no longer to be housed together with them or burdened with the same heavy work.

From August 1944, Crimean Tatars were therefore to be housed in the "Reichsgau Steiermark" together with "Vilna Tatars" (Vilnius in Lithuania). Whether this still happened in the final phase of the war can no longer be conclusively proven. Groups of Crimean Tatars had come to Austria in 1942 and 1944 and had been emp-

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<sup>3</sup> Der Osttürkische Waffen-Verband der SS. URL: <http://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Zusatz/SS/SSOsttuerkei-R.htm> (accessed: 11.08.2023).

<sup>4</sup> Krymchaks – small group of Turkic-speaking Jews based in the Crimea.

loyed in road construction and mining, in factories, and also in agriculture (often in horse hospitals) (Report, 2004: 112–115).

The Red Army attack on Crimea took place at Kerch as early as May 8, 1942, and finally from the north in December 1943. About six to eight thousand Crimean Tatars and their families joined the withdrawing German troops and reached Germany in 1944 or 1945. Including the deported forced laborers, about 15,000 Crimean Tatars were living in Germany and Austria at the end of the war. Those who fell there into the hands of the victorious Soviet army were "repatriated" and sent by the Soviets to Central Asia or Siberia. On April 8, 1944, the Soviet army attacked Sevastopol, which was captured from May 9 to 12, 1944.

At the May 11, 1944 Stalin sign an decree about deportation of Crimean Tatars.

The consequences for the Crimean Tatars are still felt today. After the capture of Crimea by the Red Army, Stalin "punished" the Crimean Tatars collectively as "traitors to the fatherland": in the period from May 18 to 21, 1944, the Crimean Tatars deported to Central Asia on charges of "collaboration with the Germans".

### *The Treatment of the "Forced Labor Question" in Vorarlberg*

In Vorarlberg in the 1990s, forced labor in the "Third Reich" was still one of the most controversial historical topics to talk about. In particular Margarethe Ruff's work "Um ihre Jugend betrogen" (Deceived of Their Youth), published in 1996, drew attention to the Ukrainian forced laborers in Vorarlberg who, beginning in 1942, were used as recruits, forced labour or prisoners of war on the Illwerke power plant construction sites, in local factories, in trade, or in agriculture as part of the inhumane and racist Nazi policies (Ruff, 1996).

Oral history research trips to western and eastern Ukraine expanded the state of knowledge. In 1998, on the initiative of Margarethe Ruff, the Vorarlberg Green Party, the Theater Kosmos, and the Johann August Malin Historical Society, donations for former Ukrainian forced laborers were collected and distributed in Kremenchuk, Luhansk, and Rowenki.<sup>5</sup> These actions were carried out two years before the Austrian state felt committed to the historical processing of this dark chapter of the past.

In 2000, things changed. On August 8, Austria published the "Federal Law on the Fund for Voluntary Payments by the Republic of Austria to Former Slave and Forced Laborers of the National Socialist Regime (Reconciliation Fund Law)", which went into effect on November 27, 2000<sup>6</sup>. The state of Vorarlberg now also had to face the fact that around 15,000 people had performed forced labor here from 1939 to

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<sup>5</sup> Speech by the chairman of the Johann-August-Malin Society, Werner Bundschuh, held in the town hall of Luhansk on September 7, 1998 on the occasion of a donation handover to former forced laborers. URL: <http://www.malingesellschaft.at/aktuell/weiteres/zwangsarbeit/rede-des-obmannes-der-malin-gesellschaft-gehalten-im-rathaus-von-luhansk-am-7.-september-1998-anlaesslich-einer-spendenubergabe-an-ehemalige-zwangsarbeiterinnen> (accessed: 11.08.2023).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

1945. Because the sources are hard to find, the number is based on an estimate that seems reasonable<sup>7</sup>.

Volume 26/1 of the Austrian Historical Commission, "Forced Laborers on the Territory of the Republic of Austria 1939-1945," presented in 2004, provides information on the complex development of the "labor deployment" and the individual escalation phases, especially after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941. This research report also contains the figures determined for Austria<sup>8</sup>. Just to make the dimension clear: Throughout the German Reich, it is estimated that close to twenty million people were forcibly put to work during World War II. On the soil of the Republic of Austria, as of September 30, 1944, no fewer than 580,640 civilian foreign workers were in service.

In the Office of the Vorarlberg Federal State Government, an office for forced labor issues was established in 2000. Its head, Wilfried Längle, was entrusted with the task of examining compensation claims. The Vorarlberg State Archives house the files of approximately 600 people whose stay in Vorarlberg had to be confirmed. Summing up, the Provincial Coordinator stated the following on the handling of the Austrian Settlement Fund:

"Until it ceased its activities at the end of 2005, the Reconciliation Fund had paid compensation to around 135,000 former forced laborers. Around 4,000 of them were probably employed in Vorarlberg at the time. Today, most of them live in the successor states of the former Soviet Union, especially in Ukraine, as well as in Poland, France, the former Yugoslavia, the Netherlands and Belgium, and also in the USA, Canada, Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand; some of them are still here in Vorarlberg" (Wilfried, 2006: 199).

In order to advance research into the history of forced labor in Vorarlberg, Margarethe Ruff and the author initiated the project "Building Bridges: Former Forced Laborers from Ukraine between Return and New Home (Vorarlberg Region)", which was carried out from 2006 to 2008<sup>9</sup>. Within the framework of this project, the experiences of former forced laborers in Vorarlberg, their return perspectives, the effects of forced labor on the living situation in the old homeland, intra-family communication about this period of life, breaking the silence in the new

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<sup>7</sup> The contemporary historian and former state archive employee Wolfgang Weber comes to the following conclusion when viewing the source situation "Basically, on the basis of the existing source material, it does not seem possible to do a factual reconstruction of the Nazi forced work in Vorarlberg. The written tradition is too different with regard to its provenance and its conditions of origin so that a comprehensive history of Nazi forced work in Vorarlberg could be written. However, exemplary priorities for individual companies, towns or people are possible, less for entire economic sectors (Weber, 2001: 587).

<sup>8</sup> For the numerous development of forced labor on the ground of today's Austria and the methodological difficulties in the statistical evaluation (Spoerer, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> The research report is not published. Parts of this can be viewed on the website. URL: <http://www.erinnern.at/bundeslaender/oesterreich/bundeslaender/vorarlberg/bibliothek/dokumente/das-projekt-brucken-schlagen-ehemalige-zwangsarbeiter-und-zwangsarbeiterinnen-aus-der-ukraine-zwischen-ruckkehr-und-neuer-heimat-margarethe-ruff-und-werner-bundschuh> (accessed: 11.08.2023).

Ukraine, and life after "compensation" were highlighted. The files of the Reconciliation Fund in the Vorarlberg State Archives were also reviewed in order to find contact persons. In 2014, the volume "Underage Prisoners of Fascism" was published, a book on life histories of Polish and Ukrainian forced laborers in Vorarlberg (Ruff, Bundschuh, 2014).

### *Crimean Tatars in the village of Alberschwende*

Among the Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, or French names, the name Yurter stood out during the forced laborer research. Under No. 609 in the applications for compensation in the National Archives, the name of Yurter Ismet (Abibullah), born on March 13, 1939, in the Crimea, is listed there. He traveled to Landeck, Bregenz, Innsbruck, Graz, and Vienna with the "family" (sister Suade Akcollu GZ. 126.849) (1947–1948; Bregenz sanatorium; no records). An address in Ankara was given as the place of residence. Contacting Ismet Yurter in Ankara failed, but his brother Fikret Yurter from New York, the chairman of the Crimean Tatars in the USA, immediately contacted:

"Dear Dr. Werner Bundschuh, my name is Fikret Yurter, I am Ismet Yurter's brother. I am a dipl.-Ing and live in the USA, New York. Your email was forwarded to me. If you can send me your address, I will send you the necessary information about the Crimean tatars and forced laborers in Austria. Best regards and with full respect, Fikret K. Yurter, the chairman of the National Center of Crimean Tatars in America<sup>10</sup>.

On March 9, 2005, he wrote from New York to the office of the Austrian Reconciliation Fund:

"According to the regulations of the AUSTRIAN PAYMENT FUND, I am also entitled to receive a payment. Since I attended the elementary school in Alberschwende/Bregenzwald after the war – which was a foundation stone for my future – I would like to send the amount due to me, subject to your consent, as a token of my gratitude to the Alberschwende school. Fikret Yurter" (Ruff, Bundschuh, 2014: 18).

After the first contact, there were longer phone calls and then a visit. In September 2005, Fikret Yurter went to Vorarlberg and went to Alberschwende, which is where he went to school after the war and is thankful for to this day, especially to his teacher, Franz Berkmann, who taught him German outside of class. As announced, he donated his forced labor compensation to the Hof elementary school in Alberschwende.

He had the amount of 7,630.65 euros transferred to the principal, Lieselotte Rohn. His visit was covered by the media on several occasions: On October 4, 2005, the Austrian Radio (ORF) program "Thema" broadcast a report on Fikret Yurter and the Crimean Tartars. The feature, entitled "Deported Crimean Tatar," was created by Petra Kanduth. A short version was broadcast on regional television in the program "Vorarlberg heute" (Vorarlberg Today) under the title "Alberschwende: Return of

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<sup>10</sup> E-Mail from 31.08.2007.



former forced laborers." On the website of the Fund for Reconciliation, Peace, and Cooperation, the following quote can be found in the article "Kiss on the hand for an Orange, Rose for Mozart":

"The Crimean Tatar Fikret Yurter, a brother of the writer Feyzi Rahman Yurter, had to recover corpses under particularly humiliating circumstances in Vienna during the Nazi era, in addition to other hard labor. Now he donated the entire amount of 7,630 euros that he was awarded as a former slave laborer to the Alberschwende elementary school in Vorarlberg. He had learned to read and write there after the war before studying engineering in Germany and then emigrating to the USA. 'That was the basis for my later success in life,' he proudly and gratefully assured ÖVF (Austrian Reconciliation Fund) officer Pinar Düzel, who linguistically and expertly handled his application, which was submitted in Turkish"<sup>11</sup>.

About his brother, the report of the Reconciliation Fund states:

"The Crimean Tatar Feyzi Rahman Yurter was transported to a labor camp in Graz in the fall of 1944 and transferred to Innsbruck in January 1945, very much as an "Eastern worker."

In his identity papers, Yurter, who today lives in Germany as a Crimean Tatar writer respected by his surviving compatriots, first gave the USSR as his country of birth, but then Turkey, because he suspected what fate would befall him if he returned as a Crimean Tatar (Feichtelbauer, 2005: 98). The writer died in Ankara after returning to Turkey in December 2009.

Fikret Yurter has well documented his stay in Vorarlberg and published his correspondence with the teachers Liselotte Rohn and Margit Bereuter (Yurter, 2005). He stayed in Alberschwende from September 12 to 14, 2005. A small celebration was held in his honor at the elementary school he once attended as a student:

"After a welcoming song in German and English, children from the individual classes presented self-designed calendar pictures as a thank you. Mayor Reinhard Dür thanked him on behalf of the community with a local history book and an oil painting of the Alberschwender village center. With flute playing and a common final song everybody said goodbye to Mr. Yurter and his wife and wished them many more years of health and joy" (Rohn, 2005).

A letter from Lisbeth Berkman, the daughter of the teacher who gave little Fikret German lessons for which he is still so grateful, reads: "Dear Mr. Yurter, yesterday was our father's birthday. How happy he would have been about your visit to Alberschwende, your donation, and, above all, that you have not forgotten him and his commitment to you."

Under the headline "To Alberschwenders very grateful", the daily *Vorarlberger Nachrichten* also reported on the visit of the former teenage forced laborer on September 16, 2005. Under "The cornerstone for a career. Former forced laborer donates 7,630 euros to Alberschwende elementary school", the daily's supplement *Heimat: Bregenzerwald und Kleinwalsertal* reported on the visit on September 22, 2005:

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<sup>11</sup> URL: <http://www.reconciliationfund.at/index-2.html> (accessed: 10.08.2023).

"The life story of Fikret Yurter sounds adventurous. As a child, his family was deported from the Crimea to Austria by the National Socialists. Via various stations, the Crimean Tatar family [sic!] arrived at the refugee camp in Alberschwende. Fikret Yurter was deeply impressed by the commitment of his teacher at the time. Even in his free time, the teacher took care of the refugee child and taught him the German language. "Teacher Berkmann laid the foundation for my career," says Fikret Yurter with gratitude. He financed his engineering studies in Germany by working nights in the coal mine. Later, Yurter emigrated to America, where he worked as an engineer in reactor production. The 72-year-old now lives near New York. During his visit to Alberschwende, children and teachers gave their generous benefactor a warm welcome. Fikret Yurter was able to share many memories at the meeting with his former schoolmates."

However, these articles did not address why he was awarded the highest compensation for forced labor and what a terrible youthful history lay behind it.

Kirimcan Naciye (Bubay), who was born on November 4, 1937, and her parents were sent from Yalta to Austria, must have been through a lot: Her stations were: "1943–44 Strasshof, Vienna; 1944 Feldkirch, Tisis (Vorarlberg); and 1945 Liechtenstein." At the time of the research (2008), she lived in the USA.

B. S. [REDACTED], M.D.  
[REDACTED] Drive  
No. Brunswick, New Jersey 08902  
(732) 821-9596

July 15, 2001

RE: N [REDACTED]

TO AUSTRIAN RECONCILIATION FUND

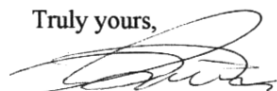
Dear Sir/Madame:

Please be advised that the above-named patient is suffering from chronic depression aggravated by chronic panic disorder caused by posttraumatic syndrome. She was a victim of forced detention in the labor camps during the World War II as a child when she suffered from severe psychological stress caused by separation from her parents and inhuman living conditions.

She is still suffering from constant nightmares, insomnia, depressed mood and persistent anxiety enabling her to function properly in daily life.

If you have questions or need additional information with regard of my patient, N [REDACTED], please do not hesitate to contact me at the above mentioned address.

Truly yours,



S. [REDACTED], M.D.

Medical conclusion of the former forced laborer, who suffering from the posttraumatic syndrome and other consequences of war even 50 years after WW2.

A very prominent Crimean Tatar refugee is the well-known Turkish historian İlber Ortaylı: his family also fled to Vorarlberg. He was born in Bregenz on May 21, 1947.



Crimean Tatars during the Ramadan celebration at the lager in Landeck, 1946.  
Private archive of Bundschuh (Permit: Fikert Yurter 2004)

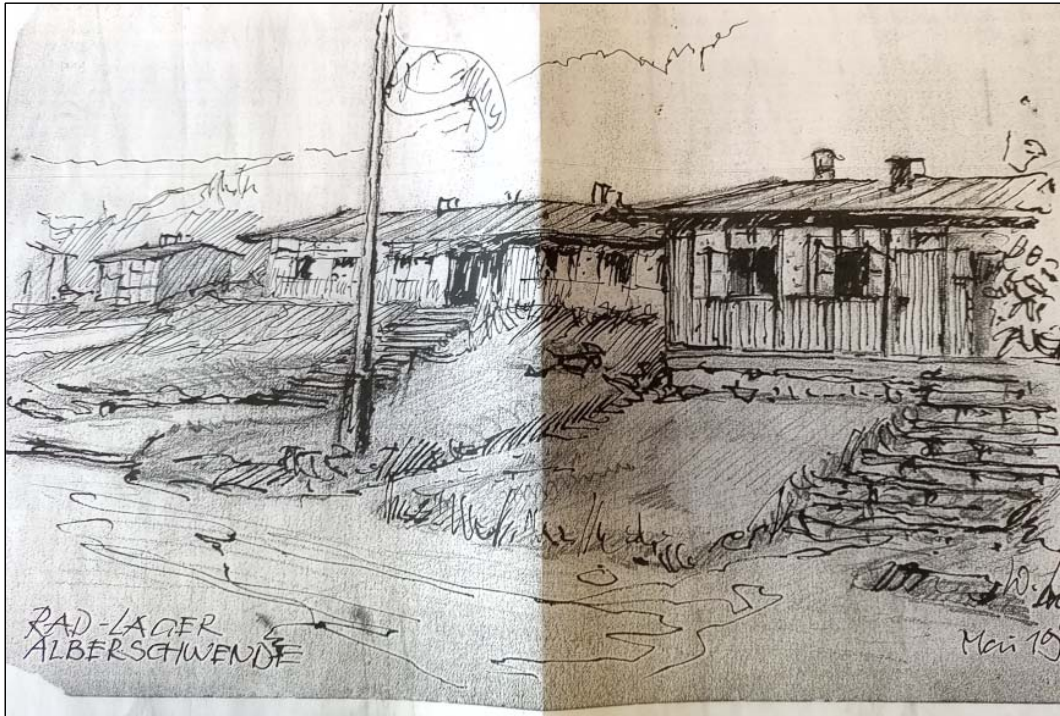
A photo of the camp in Landeck (Tyrol) (end of 1945) shows about 110 people, more than half of them children (Yurter, 2005: 30).



Crimean Tatars taken in front of the camp in Alberschwende.  
Private archive of Bundschuh (Permit: Fikert Yurter 2004).

A photo taken in front of the camp in Alberschwende gives an impression of the number of Crimean Tatar refugees: the photo shows about 50 men, women, and some children.





RAD Lager in Alberschwende, pencil drawing by unknown author from May 1945 (Archive of Municipal administration of Alberschwende, I-059/02, Sch.15/Fasz. 186).

After the war (until 1948) refugees were housed in the former *Reich Labour Service (Reichsarbeitsdienst; RAD)* camp. The camp was under French administration (until 1949).



View of Alberschwende drawn by Fikert Yurter, 1948. Private archive of Bundschuh (Permit: Fikert Yurter 2004).



On the soccer field in Alberschwende (1947).  
Photo by Fikret Yurter, private archive of Bundschuh.

### ***Remembrance work in the USA***

The commemoration of the fate of the Crimean Tatars in the USA is significantly influenced by Fikret Yurter. He is the chairman of the National Center of Crimean Tatars there. Under his leadership, the American Crimean Tatar Association founded a national cultural center in the Brooklyn borough of New York in 1971. On May 18, 1986 – 42 years after the deportation by Stalin – a monument to the deportees was erected at his initiative in Washington Memorial Park in Long Island, New York.

Like his brother, the later writer Feyzi Rahman Yurter, Fikret Yurter escaped the Nazi genocide. For decades, the two have fought for the recognition and reparation of the injustice done to the Tatars by the Soviets – and, at the beginning of the third millennium, for the compensation of the forced laborers under the Austrian Reconciliation Fund.

On October 23, 2002, Fikret Yurter transmitted from New York to the Reconciliation Fund the applications of 92 Crimean Tatars who had been deployed on the territory of the present-day Republic of Austria during the Second World War. This eventually developed into that intensive contact, which also led to his visit to Vorarlberg.

### ***Summary / Conclusion***

During the Nazi regime, approximately 15,000 forced laborers, primarily from Poland, Ukraine, and other parts of the Soviet Union, were employed in Vorarlberg, the westernmost state of the Republic of Austria. They worked on construction sites for Illwerke AG in the expansion of hydroelectric power, in the textile industry, and in agriculture. In the late 20th century, the first research on forced labor was published in Vorarlberg. Margarethe Ruff visited former forced laborers in Western and Eastern Ukraine. Together with Werner Bundschuh, she conducted oral history re-



search in Rowenki, Luhansk, Liwiv, and other locations, and delivered donations to the former deportees. During these research activities, they also encountered the Crimean Tatars who came to Vorarlberg in 1945 and were accommodated in a camp in Alberschwende (Bregenzerwald region). The author of this article established contact with Fikert Yurter, brother of the renowned writer Feyzi Rahman Yurter, in 2005. The Yurter family was also deported to Vorarlberg. However, Fikert also had fond memories of his time in Alberschwende, where he learned German, how to read and write. The examination of the files of the "Austrian Fund for Reconciliation" in the Vorarlberg State Archive revealed that other Crimean Tatars also applied for compensation payments from the United States. This article was initially published in 2016. The English revision was carried out in collaboration with Dr. Hüseyin Cicek, Department for Religious Studies, University of Vienna.

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## СЛЕДЫ КРЫМСКИХ ТАТАР В ЗЕМЛЕ ФОРАРЛЬБЕРГ, АВСТРИЯ

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Во время исследования истории использования подневольного труда татар на территории Австрии во время Второй мировой войны автор статьи наткнулся на малоизвестные страницы истории Форарльберга. Речь идет о трагических судьбах крымских татар, которые будучи мусульманским тюркоязычным меньшинством, попали в жернова нацистской политики завоевания и истребления в Восточной Европе. Впоследствии они стали жертвами сталинских репрессий. Эти люди оказались в самой западной австрийской земле Форарльберг в 1945–1946 гг., но выжили в сложных условиях войны и среди беженцев, разместившихся в селе Альбершвенд.

**Ключевые слова:** крымские татары, мусульманское меньшинство, принудительные работы, Вторая мировая война в Австрии.

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